

Title How is shamanism represented in fantasy fiction? A study into the ancient practice, its important elements, and how fantasy authors use them in their writing.

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How is shamanism represented in fantasy fiction?

A study into the ancient practice, its important elements, and how fantasy authors use them in their writing.

By Heather Ivatt

A thesis submitted to the University of Bedfordshire, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree in Masters of Arts by Research.

Abstract

This thesis aims to explore the representation of shamanism in fantasy fiction, focusing on its various aspects and those who practice it. It is accompanied by an extract of my fantasy novel, *Transcendent*, which follows Outcast: a man exiled by his people for his misuse of powers, who now charges innocents for helping them. He, and those like him, are known as Magickers and all but a few are left, the others having been slaughtered by an invading empire.

The thesis will explore my use of Outcast's character to demonstrate aspects of shamanism. This will be achieved by analysing a collection of fantasy novels. Those I will investigate are: *Clan of the Cave Bear*, by Jean. M. Auel; *Shaman of Stonewylde*, by Kit Berry; and the *Soldier Son* trilogy by Robin Hobb. I will also discuss the difference between shamanism and the occult, as the magic systems used in fantasy fiction can be associated with one or the other. Finally, my findings will be compared to my own creative work, to fully understand the representation of shamanism in the genre and how it can be applied in practice.

Declaration

I, Heather Ivatt, declare that this thesis is of my own work, unaided, and has not been submitted to any other University for a degree or examination, and is submitted to the University of Bedfordshire for the Masters of Arts by Research in Creative Writing, January 2017. Where I have cited the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work.

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Date: 11th January 2017

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Finally, a huge, massive thank you to my author-brain for being so imaginative and my inherent stubborn personality for not accepting defeat, for pushing through the agony, and for being such a pain-in-the-backside perfectionist that I reached the finishing line with a smile on my face.

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Prologue

The wagon was on its side, its contents spilling out onto the dirt track like innards from a shredded belly, bolts of blood-red fabric spreading across the earth. Outcast wandered up the path and stopped a few paces from where the horse's corpse lay in a pool of its own blood, its jaw slack and its tongue hanging out of its mouth, an arrow jutting from its throat. Three men were rummaging through the sacks and crates, calling out in glee whenever they found a trinket worth taking, their hands greedily snatching up pieces of jewellery, silken scarves, and supple leather boots – anything they could sell for a tidy profit.

Watching the trio at work, Outcast chewed on a mouthful of Ambago leaves and folded his arms across his chest. He didn't need to speak to them to know who they were. Their reputation preceded them. They were the Jaden brothers. Born on the edge of poverty, they'd spent their lives picking on the weak and robbing innocent men and women blind, taking whatever they wanted without a care for those they harmed. Well, Outcast could relate.

The eldest of the three, Lare, was a foot taller than his brothers and had a grizzly, ebony beard that covered the lower half of his face, giving him a rough and dishevelled appearance. As always he organised the other two, ordering them to speed up in their search. 'Get a move on!' he snapped. 'We ain't got all day!'

His brothers grumbled but did as they were told, abandoning their slow perusal of the overturned wagon and instead pocketing whatever they wanted at a speed to soothe their sibling's wrath. It was only when Milo, the youngest, a teenage boy with a pockmarked face and three missing teeth, noticed they had an audience, that they stopped what they were doing and glared at Outcast.

'Who the hell are you?' Milo demanded. His hand went to the dagger at his waist, his chubby fingers wrapping around its hilt.

Outcast ignored the question. While the men had been searching the wagon, so had his gaze, catching sight of a singular item that intrigued him. Spitting the Ambago mush onto the ground, he pointed at a grey, fur-trimmed fabric draped over a box of sewing supplies. 'The cloak. I want it.'

'This?' It was Daren, the middle brother, who sauntered over to the cloak and took it from its bed, draping it about his own shoulders and shooting Outcast a triumphant smirk. 'It's mine.'

'Give it to me,' Outcast replied. His voice was low and dangerous, matching his glower.

'This wagon belongs to us now.' Milo cocked his head arrogantly to one side and arched his wiry blond eyebrows in a silent challenge.

'I want that cloak.' It was a thing of beauty. He could see its magnificent craftsmanship even from where he stood. The sunlight filtering through the canopy of leaves overhead alighted on the silver patterns stitched along its edges, a gentle breeze ruffling the fur like grass in a meadow, each strand rippling softly in the wind. There was nothing else he wanted from that wagon. The cloak had caught his eye and he would be leaving with it.

'Hang on.' Lare stepped forward and held up his hands, signalling for his brothers to hold their tongues. He narrowed his beady eyes at Outcast, scrutinising him from head to toe, a curious expression on his bearded face. A few seconds passed and then his eyes grew wide, almost popping out of his head. 'Wait, you're that Magicker! The Magicker with the one eye!'

Outcast remained silent. It was the onset of panic he enjoyed the most, seeing a person's resolve crumble under the weight of his presence. A grin tweaked the corners of his lips as Lare backed away, cautious and all too aware of the danger before him.

'Give him the cloak,' the brother told the others.

'What?' Daren spluttered in outrage and tugged the cloak tighter about his shoulders. 'No! It's mine! I ain't giving him nothing!'

'You idiot!' Lare grabbed hold of him by the scruff of his neck. 'Give him the damn cloak!'

Daren booted his brother hard in the shin and stalked away, putting some distance between them. His brow crinkled and he stared at his older sibling in disgust. 'What the hell's the matter with you?'

'He's one of them,' Lare replied, still eying Outcast warily.

'I don't care who he is. I ain't giving over anything that's mine.'

'Did our ma drop you on your head too many times? Don't you know what he's done? Give him what he wants. You've heard the rumours flying around these parts.'

'Rumours? Ha!' he spat, staring down his nose at Outcast. 'I bet they're just talk. If he wants this damn cloak, he can earn it just like I did.'

Outcast didn't move.

'See,' Daren chuckled. 'I told you he was all talk.'

As the man turned his back on him, Outcast closed his eye and focused. He pushed his senses into the darkness of his mind, searching for the door he wanted. It opened easily, welcoming him as an old friend, and he crossed the threshold. He felt himself detaching from his body. It was a strange sensation, almost like floating, but one he was used to after many years of practice. The world around him grew dim. Faint outlines of trees and stones could be seen, but their colours were grey and lifeless. Only the men standing before him were different. A faint glow surrounded them, pulsating with the amber light of life, and they were frozen in time, neither blinking nor breathing. Their auras drew him closer like beacons and he crept towards them, casting a glance over his shoulder at the body he'd left behind. His physical form was as motionless as stone, his feet planted firmly on the ground, his dark, braided hair trailing down his back. His face impassive, only the slight crinkling of his forehead showed his concentration, his breathing calm and his eye closed. Outcast stared at himself and grinned.

Returning his attention to the brothers, he pressed on, his weightless astral self drifting silently towards the men, leaving no boot prints in the earth. When he neared Daren, he stopped and lifted one arm, placing his hand flush against the man's chest. The middle brother, so arrogant

and naïve, was laughing. His mouth hung open in glee as he mocked his opponent, oblivious to the danger before him. Outcast concentrated harder and pushed his fingers into Daren's chest, the tips sinking through the shirt and flesh beneath, inching closer to his heart. Feeling the organ's warmth, he clutched it tight and squeezed, his grasp unforgiving. When he felt the coldness of death seeping into Daren's core, he withdrew his hand and walked back to his body, slipping into his mind through the open door and closing it behind him.

Colour flooded back to the world. Birds sung, perched on boughs, an audience to the scene below, and the bitter wind that gusted along the track tousled his hair, the beaded braids clanking together as he watched Daren collapse to his knees. The man's laughter had died the moment Outcast had returned to his body and the blood had drained from his face. One hand clutching at his chest, Daren slumped to the earth, unmoving.

'Daren?' Lare crouched beside his brother, feeling for a pulse at his throat. His fingers trembled and he wailed in grief. 'Daren!'

Outcast felt nothing. No shame crippled him and no regret twisted his stomach into knots. His gaze was fixed on the fresh corpse, but not on the man himself – on the cloak still draped about his shoulders. Lare was cradling his brother's body in his arms while Milo, pale and frightened, hovered beside him, too stunned to speak. Anger burst from Lare's lips as a furious roar and he lowered Daren to the ground, shooting to his feet and storming towards Outcast.

'Don't!' Milo launched himself at his eldest sibling and grabbed hold of his arm, dragging him back. Lare shook him off, his fury a furnace burning in his glare. He clenched his teeth and snarled in frustration, torn between avenging one brother and saving the other. Eventually logic won through and he took hold of Milo's arm, yanking him behind him as he tore down the track, abandoning Daren's corpse by the wagon.

A growl echoed in Outcast's throat. He had been eager for blood, knowing that a fight would have expended some of that pent-up energy and boredom long journeys always aroused in him. Still, there were benefits in allowing a few enemies to escape. Now his reputation would grow even

more. Fear would be rife and those in need of a man with his powers would be eager to pay his prices, knowing what he could do. Sauntering over to the fallen brother, he bent down and snatched up the cloak, feeling the softness of its material in his hands. He pulled it over his shoulders and marvelled at how light it felt. It was a good find.

‘Help!’ The cry came from the woods to his right, the voice weak and fading.

His curiosity too great, he closed his eye again only this time he focused on the world around him, directing his senses outwards. He felt the firm ground beneath his feet and heard the subtle crunch of dirt and stones beneath his boot as he took a step forwards. He could feel the land, could sense the life in every part of it – the individual leaves on the trees, the stream trickling over rocks in the distance, the raven protecting its eggs in its nest. He could feel the hatred Mother Nature held for him, her disgust at his years of violence and greed, and he ignored it, pushing on until he found what he was looking for.

His eye flying open, he stalked off through the trees, his destination fixed firmly in his mind. About half a mile into the forest, a woman sat with her back against a fallen log. She was gazing at her feet with unseeing eyes, a limp hand resting on a gaping stomach wound, the hole in her gut leaking crimson, staining the fabric of her dress. Her skin was a deathly shade of white and her auburn hair was plastered to her face with sweat. In her arm, she held a baby wrapped in a fine blanket. It gurgled and cried, wriggling in its dead mother’s embrace.

‘Please,’ the fading voice begged in Outcast’s ear. ‘Help us.’

Outcast cast a sideways glance at the woman standing beside him. The hole in her stomach was clear to see, but the blood was black and congealed, and her auburn hair hung in loose, sweat-drenched tendrils around her face. He arched an amused eyebrow at her. ‘You’re beyond help. You’re dead.’

She stared sadly at her corpse resting against the log. ‘I know.’ She knelt beside her body, and smiled at her baby. ‘My husband was killed by those men too. They slaughtered him and threw his body into the woods. I took my baby and I fled, but one of them caught me with a blade. I ran as

far as I could, but I was so tired. All I wanted was to save my child and now I'm begging you to do the same.'

'Begging doesn't work on me,' he replied, shifting the cloak to lie better across his shoulders.

'And I hate babies.'

'I can pay you!' She tried to latch onto his wrist, but her hand passed through him.

'How much?'

'You can take anything you want from the wagon.'

'I already have what I want.' He gestured to the cloak.

'My family will pay you then,' she insisted, eyes wide with desperation. 'Take my baby to them in Marwich. They have a farm there.'

'A big farm?'

'No,' she admitted, 'but they will reward you.'

He stopped to think it over. Marwich was a relatively successful trading town full of taverns and markets, known for its rare items, but then again, the farms that encircled it were not of the same calibre. Most struggled to make ends meet. Unless the woman's family grew fields of pure gold, he doubted the reward would be worth such a long journey with a screaming orphan on his back. An orphan he would have to feed and protect, an orphan that would be loud. He ran a hand over the soft cloak. He already had what he wanted.

'You're on your own.' He spun on his heels and headed back through the woods.

'No, please!' the mother wailed, floating after him. 'You can't leave him here with nothing but a blanket! He needs you!'

Outcast paused. After a second or two of inner deliberation, he turned back and crossed to where the crying baby lay. Looking down at its chubby face, he made his decision. He knelt beside the woman's corpse and stretched out a hand. Taking hold of the blanket's edge, he took the baby from it and dropped the child into his mother's lap.

‘This will sell for a pretty coin,’ he said, draping the blanket over his shoulder. As he wandered back through the woods towards the dirt track, he took a fresh handful of Ambago leaves from the pouch at his belt and tossed them into his mouth, the woman’s ghostly shriek mingling with her baby’s cry as a cold wind gusted through the trees.

Chapter One

The boy sat up, felt the back of his head, and frowned. He had fallen hard, hitting his head on the creek-bed stones, but there was no blood, no lump. His nut-brown eyes widened in surprise. The creek was gone. There was no sign of it having ever been there: no water, no moss-covered stones, no soggy mud. Just a dry patch of dirt that filled a circular clearing bordered by tall, thin pines.

Alarmed, he pushed himself to his feet and glared at his surroundings. He could have sworn there had been a creek. Thinking back, he remembered running through the shallow water when he had lost his footing, his need to catch the fleeing doe making him careless. He could remember the cold water swallowing his feet and splashing up his legs as he bolted after the animal. The boy pushed aside his confusion and focused on the task at hand, as he had been taught. No matter where he was or how he had ended up there, he needed to get back to his people. His prey would be long gone by now and, judging by the dark sky that loomed above, his father would be hunting him down instead, livid that he had stayed away from the homestead for so long. The boy growled, frustrated at the humiliation of being outwitted by a doe, and focused on the world around him, hoping to find his way home to begrudgingly accept his punishment, but he recognised nothing.

This wasn't the forest of his people.

The oak trees he had spent his younger days climbing had been replaced by slender trunks of ash-grey wood, their lower branches starting halfway up rather than head-height like he was used to. The dark leaves he knew by sight were now a vibrant green, almost blinding with vitality, rustling in a gentle breeze he didn't feel. The earth beneath his bare feet was soft and springy, the sharp stones that would dig into his toughened soles missing. The stars embedded in the jet-black sky were luminescent as they watched over him, taunting him with their pure, white light. They weren't the small dots he had gazed up at with his siblings, but larger orbs decorating the dark blanket, cosying up to the glowing moon like old friends.

This wasn't his land.

The boy fought to control his fear, remembering what his father had taught him about courage, and clenched his hands into fists. He was a man now after all. He had been through the quest of his people, had ventured off on his own to find himself, and had returned healthy and alive. He couldn't be scared anymore. With that in mind, he took a deep breath and headed for the break in the trees to the north. His steps were purposeful, his head held high with pride, as he moved through the strange forest, looking for the way home, his determined gaze sweeping from left to right in search of a familiar tree or trail. His ears were alert, listening for any danger that might be creeping up on him. When no light footsteps or faint breathing reached him and no cracking of twigs echoed in the distance, suspicion became a stone in his belly. There were no predators trailing him as he walked deeper into the woods and no creatures skittering across the branches. It was eerily quiet.

A twig snapped somewhere up ahead.

Instincts kicking in, he crept towards the source, keeping his steps light and his eyes focused. His movements were measured and precise, just as his father had taught him. The silent wind rustled the leaves overhead, teasing the strands of his soot-black hair as it danced lightly across his shoulder blades.

The boy crouched low as he reached a final ring of trees, taking shelter behind one of the wider ones. He inspected the clearing beyond and frowned. With its light brown earth and trickling creek running down one side, it was strangely familiar. A collection of ten huts filled the space, their walls made from a framework of wooden poles with tanned deer hides to protect those inside from the elements. Smoke rose from the holes in their roofs, evidence of life, and a fire pit in the centre of the clearing roared with orange flames, shadowy figures sitting cross-legged in a circle around it.

He was home.

Staring back at the woods behind him, his forehead creased in confusion. The land was unfamiliar, its green leaves too colourful for the trees he had climbed as a boy with his brother, and the dirt too dark to be the earth he was used to walking on. Yet those huts, the fire pit, the shadowy

figures – they were what he knew best. It was as if his camp had been dropped into the unknown landscape of a strange world.

Part of him swelled with happiness at finally reaching his people, but there was a bigger part that was telling him not to believe his eyes. Where were the oak trees and the talismans put up for protection? Where were his father and his mother, yelling at him for running off by himself? Where was his grandfather with his wise face, his hair threaded with feathers? Something wasn't right. Feeling brave, he emerged from behind his tree and stalked towards the nearest hut, one hand extended. When his fingers met the rough material of the deer hide, he shivered, his skin tingling. 'This isn't real,' he told himself. 'None of this is real.'

As if reacting to his words, the hut shimmered then faded away, the others following it into nothingness, until all that remained was a large clearing with a creek. He stared at the flowing water and then it too disappeared. Finally, the flames in the fire pit died down and the shadows seated around it were soaked up by the soil.

'You have surprised me yet again,' a rough voice said, husky and intimidating. 'I feared you would not glimpse the truth.'

'Who said that?' the boy demanded and adopted a defensive stance, head whipping left and right. 'Show yourself!'

'Show me the proper respect and perhaps I will grace you with my presence.' The words grated with animosity.

'Why should I respect someone who chooses to hide rather than face me like a man?'

'You insult me with your attitude.'

'Talking with a coward insults me.' His short temper reached its limit, making his retort a bitter snap.

A growl emanated from beyond the trees to his left and, despite his desire to stay strong, the boy flinched. More twigs snapped, this time closer to where he stood, and he whirled around to

face the direction he had come only to find another wall of thick thorns barring his path. His eyes widened at the sight of the tangled barrier. It hadn't been there a few moments before.

'You are bold for one so young.' Although the vicious undertones were there, it spoke with a curious softness that almost soothed the boy's erratically beating heart. 'I have never met a child before who holds such fire within him.'

'Child?' He pulled a face at the term. 'I am not a child. I am almost thirteen winters old.'

'And yet you still have so much to learn.' A sigh was followed by another cracking twig as whoever it was concealed amongst the trees started to pace the outskirts of the clearing. 'Tell me, does your ego grieve your father as much as it does me?'

'My father says I will be a brave man.' He puffed out his chest with pride at the memory: his father kneeling before him two days after his return from the quest, a talisman of honour in his hand and a smile on his face. 'He says that I am quick and cunning, that I will be the best hunter this tribe has ever seen. He says that I will lead my people one day.'

'A foolish dream.'

Bristled, he fought back a livid curse. 'What did you just say?'

'You will never be a hunter, Nambe.'

His anger dissipated somewhat and fear gripped his chest tight, his throat dry. 'H-How did you know my name?'

'I know everything,' the voice said arrogantly. 'I see everything. I am the bitter bite in the winter wind. I am the dancing flames of the fire pit that cooks your meat. I am the voice in your head, whispering to you in your dreams.'

Feeling less sure of himself, Nambe staggered back a few paces, his brown eyes searching the clearing and its wall of trees. The shadows pressed in on him from all sides as the stars dimmed overhead, the moon disappearing behind a blanket of dark clouds. The cold air descended to engulf him, chilling his skin and chattering his teeth. 'W-Who are you?'

‘I am the one you should both fear and worship. I am the dam the waters of your people burst from. I am the night and day, the dawn and dusk. I am your beginning.’

Nambe spun back to glance at the wall of thorns, realising the voice hovered just beyond the black mass of sharp twigs. He crouched down and inched towards it, stopping a few metres away when his fear rooted him to the spot. As he peered at the barrier blocking his way back, he choked on a strangled cry.

Two blue eyes stared back at him, pools of ice with flecks of white. Startled, he stumbled away and tripped over his own feet to land with a painful thud on the ground.

‘You fear me,’ it said with wry amusement. ‘Good. Now you know your place.’ A rustling of leaves overhead grew louder as a gale blew through the clearing, Nambe shivering where he cowered on the earth. The blue eyes shone with ancient wisdom as they narrowed at him. ‘Perhaps this time you will listen to what I have to say, will heed my advice and not resist your calling.’

‘This time?’

‘Ah, of course. You do not remember our previous meetings.’ The thorns parted as a shape pushed its way through them, emerging from the dark wall to step into the clearing. Taller than most men and with a coat of shimmering blue-grey fur, the wolf towered over him. Its fangs gleamed white as it bared its teeth at him, its paws crunching dirt when it took two more steps towards the terrified child. The beast didn’t open its jaws to speak, but the boy heard its words clearly in his mind. ‘Most would recall images and feelings from such meetings, but you have erased them completely. To bury those memories so deeply and so successfully is testament to your potential. I see great power in your future, Nambe.’

Nambe was shaking. His hands gripped clumps of soil as his fingers constricted with nerves, but he pushed himself to kneel before the creature, ignoring his urge to run and instead giving in to his curiosity. ‘We’ve met before?’

‘Many times,’ the wolf confirmed with a curt nod of its head.

‘Where? When?’

‘In your dreams.’

He licked his lips anxiously, as he tried to filter through the thousands of questions clogging up his mind. Eventually the first of many found its way to the surface. ‘How long have you been visiting me?’

‘Since you were a babe in your mother’s arms.’ The wolf sat back on its haunches, its coat glistening under the sparse moonlight that peeked through the clouds shrouding it. The fur shone, the glowing strands like ripples in a lake. ‘It has taken me over twelve years to reach you like I have tonight. You are a very stubborn boy, Nambe. Your mind has resisted my presence until now. I could never appear to you in my true form, could never make you understand my message. I could only speak sparingly and at a whisper, could only show myself in the movement of the trees and the harsh bite of the wind. Now you are finally ready to hear my words.’

‘You want to tell me something?’

‘You have a calling, a purpose in life.’ The beast lifted its head higher in pride. ‘Your destiny is bigger than you have ever dreamed. You, my son, are the chosen of your people, the next in a line of powerful men. A line so long that even Nature herself has forgotten where it began. You, Nambe, son of Bélo, are to become the next shaman of your tribe.’

‘No.’ He shook his head vehemently, his dark hair tickling his shoulders as it hung loosely down his back. ‘I can’t be. I know what the shaman does. I know the life I would live if I followed that path. A boring life. One with no adventure, no freedom. Just medicine, prayers and ceremonies. I want a more exciting life.’

‘It is your destiny.’ The wolf’s tone was clipped, leaving no room for argument. ‘You cannot avoid it. You have been chosen to replace your grandfather when his time on this mortal plane is done. You are the one to take his staff and his seat, to advise your people and tend to their wounds, to honour our Great Mother with your ceremonies, and converse with the spirits still roaming these lands. It is you, Nambe, who will fulfil this fate. No other can do this.’

Nambe clenched his hands into fists and pounded them against his thighs. 'No! I will be the greatest hunter that my tribe has ever known!'

'You will do as destiny has designed,' it growled back, its fangs bared. 'You *will* honour our Great Mother and you *will* honour me!'

'I won't!' He leapt to his feet, his face set in a rebellious, defiant scowl and his eyes flashing with fury. 'I choose my own path!'

Howling to the moon, the wolf launched itself at him. With its two front paws, it rammed him to lie flat on his back, his head smacking against the ground and making him wince. The creature pinned him there, saliva dribbling from its lips to pool on the earth beside his ear. Its strength was incredible. Nambe couldn't move an inch, couldn't wriggle away. He was wedged between soil and pure rage, unable to escape. The wolf was breathing heavily as it lowered its head to his, their noses almost touching.

'I am not known for my patience nor my mercy when it comes to destiny,' the animal fumed. 'I may be a generous spirit to my people, but to those who dishonour me I am less so. Nambe, you are a man now. You have taken the quest and have returned to join your brethren, therefore you are old enough to make your own choices.' The blue eyes became angry slits. 'Yet you *must* make them. I cannot force you to walk your path, but neither can I just watch you ignore your calling. I shall ask you one last time. Think wisely, my child, for the consequences for denial will be great. Will you accept your true fate and become my next powerful one, or will you deny your destiny and doom yourself to a life of pain, anguish and isolation?'

Nambe stared up at the wolf in horror, his eyes almost popping out of his head as he gazed, stupefied, at the teeth dripping hunger on his cheeks. Its breath was overpowering, cold air and flecks of ice chilling his flesh. As he looked up at the animal pinning him to the earth, his mind raced through the remaining questions he had yet to ask, the images of his future playing out before him. If he followed the wolf's path and shackled himself to the shaman's seat, he would live a long life of respect, wisdom and status, but he would also be imprisoned by his reputation, impaled by

boredom, never to leave the village again. That was what the wolf was promising him: loneliness and a lifetime of herbs, healing and meditation.

That was not the life he wanted.

He wanted adventure. He wanted to explore the woods of his people, to roam for miles in search of new and exciting trials. He yearned for the day he would be free to break away from his father's shadow, to branch out and find his own place in the world. He wanted to run across the plains from horizon to horizon and sleep with the stars as his guardians. He couldn't do all that chained to the shaman's hut with a village to guide, watching the others leave each morning for the hunt and return each night with the corpses of their kills slung over their shoulders. Soon it would be his younger brother's turn to walk from the clearing with his father and soon it would be his brother returning from the quest, determined to be the best hunter of their tribe. And where would Nambe be? Sitting on a patterned bench with a crowd of villagers desperate to know if their prayers would be answered or if he could mend their blisters and bruises.

No.

That would not be his life.

He was Nambe, son of Bélo.

He was not a shaman.

He was a hunter.

Lifting his head from the ground just enough to match the wolf's aggressive stance with his own, Nambe spat his reply through gritted teeth. 'Never.'

The wolf closed its eyes in sadness and retreated, allowing him to prop himself up on his elbows. It shook its head and whined as if in pain, pacing the ground nearby and kicking up dirt with its large paws. 'You have no idea what you have done, you foolish boy. You have doomed yourself and those around you. I cannot undo your mind nor can I force you to walk a path your feet refuse to tread. Your answer has wounded me. I may bleed from that wound for the rest of eternity, struck down by one of my own children, but it shall not be my end.'

‘I’ve made my choice,’ Nambe said, tilting his chin up in a show of confidence. ‘Nothing you can say will change it.’

The wolf stopped pacing to glare at him, its eyes feral with determination and anger, its fury stoked by his reply. ‘Know this, son of Bélo. You may turn your back on your fate this night, but it shall never turn its back on you. For every sun that rises and you have not accepted your calling, for every moon that swells, you shall be hounded until your death and into your afterlife. Your defiance and stubborn nature will be your curse. Until you learn to walk your path, your life shall never be full. You will yearn for that which you cannot have. You will suffer unlike any other. You will see the beauty of this world and you shall taint it with your touch. Nobody and nothing will be spared from your poison. You shall be prey for misfortune, dead to those you love, an outcast. You shall see no peace or know no happiness.’

Nambe shuddered at the finality of its tone, his confidence shaken by the ominous words.

‘You have indeed made your choice, little one, and you have torn yourself from the road that would make you whole.’ The cold eyes regarded him with a superiority and disappointment Nambe knew would remain with him for the rest of his days. ‘Now you shall live out your life a shredded half of a rotten soul. Every time you close your eye, you will see this meeting.’

‘Eye?’

‘Yes, one eye.’ The wolf nodded, this time the blue-grey fur that covered its body aflame, silvery embers licking at the air and drifting across the muscular form. ‘A symbol of your rebellion, a piece of you ripped from your flesh to represent the half of your soul that you tore to ribbons by your disrespect of fate. It shall be a brand of shame, a warning to those you meet so that they will know that you, Nambe, committed the greatest sin one can ever commit: you shunned your destiny.’

With a growl, the wolf launched itself at him for a second time. It pinned him to the earth with one paw, while the other rose to hover in the air above his head, its claws extended. ‘When you wake, you will forever remember this final meeting. The pain shall be a constant reminder of the

wrong decision you made and it will mark you out to your people as the traitor you are.' The paw descended, slashing him from brow to jaw, and Nambe cried out in agony. He moved to cover his face with his hands, but the wolf used its paw to shove his arms aside.

'It's done!' Nambe screamed. 'You've marked me! Now let me go!'

'That was the mark for your people to see,' the wolf replied in a chilling voice, raising its paw once more. 'Now I must leave the brand for you.'

His pleas lodged in his throat as fear gripped him, Nambe watched in horror as the paw fell a second time, darkness shrouding his left eye as the jagged claws buried themselves in its socket. They grated at the bone housing his eye, tore through the muscles surrounding it, and shredded the tendons holding it in place. He shrieked, writhing where he lay, as the organ was ripped from its bed to patter across the earth of the clearing, a soggy mess of blood and mangled tissue. Howling in anguish, he convulsed on the earth, his blood-stained hands clutching at his mutilated face. The wolf was gone, no longer pinning him to the ground, and Nambe was alone, his screams piercing the night sky and echoing through the trees.

Chapter Two

The pain woke him. It was a fire in his eye socket, invisible flames licking at the shredded tissue. Outcast groaned and clapped a hand over the sealed flap of skin as he sat up, his other arm straining to reach the canvas sack nearby. When his fingers grasped the knotted string keeping the supplies safely inside, he yanked the sack over and opened it, searching the contents. Still grunting at the agony, his hand found the brown deerskin bag and he took the leaves from its depths, chucking them into his mouth and quickly chewing them into a pulp. Only when he tasted the bitter juices and felt them easing his pain did he allow a small sigh to escape his lips. The burning became the dull ache he was used to, a constant but bearable reminder of the weight of his decision. Bearable, that is, as long as he continued to use the Ambago leaves to control it.

Taking a deep breath, Outcast gazed at his surroundings. The campfire still flickered in the centre of the clearing, casting an orange glow that bathed the thin trunks of the trees encircling the space. His cloak, the very same he had earned nearly five years before, still sat in a neat pile on the forest floor by his makeshift bed of blankets and moss. His sword lay beside him, encased in its leather sheath with its polished hilt positioned by his right arm, ready to be wielded if the situation demanded it. Yet there was one aspect of his camp that had changed.

A sweet scent filled the air. It was light and aromatic, tickling his nostrils with every breath and filling his mind with the faintest of dizzying fogs. Enraged, he leapt to his feet and stumbled over to the pile of burning branches. A handful of orange leaves on white stems had fallen from the embers to lie abandoned on the forest floor, while several larger of their kind fed the flames and provided the stench that had angered him so much.

‘Bitch!’ he roared, kicking dirt onto the fire to put it out. Curses spewed from his lips as he dug his hands into the earth and threw more soil onto the smouldering branches until only wisps of smoke remained. A shape appearing to his left caught his attention. Snatching up his sword, he slid it from its sheath and threw it at the intruder. The blade whistled as it cut through the air, impaling the

ghostly figure and flying harmlessly through its form, embedding itself in the tree. Outcast narrowed his one eye at the white tigress as she cocked her head at the weapon, but when she turned back to meet his gaze, he found her pale blue eyes crackling with a temper that rivalled his own.

‘What?’ he challenged her, stretching his arms out to his sides.

The icy glare lost its frosty edge and the tigress sat on her haunches, observing him silently as she had done for almost two decades.

‘Did you think I wouldn’t notice?’ Outcast fumed, gesturing to the smoking branches poking out from the mountain of dirt and the orange leaves beside it. Seething, he clenched his fists at his sides, knowing that physical threats would be useless. ‘Stay out of my damn head.’ He stalked back to the sack and rummaged through it for the dried meat he had stolen three days before from a farmer’s market in a northern village. He had just taken his first bite when a strange feeling came over him. It flooded his head, dragging his thoughts into a watery abyss that left him gasping for breath. Images flashed before his eye.

A small boy wandering through a field of yellow flowers. Hungry and weak, he held back his tears and refused to look over his shoulder at the way he had come, knowing that the path he had travelled was closed to him forever. Banished for his crimes, he had been exiled, his name taken from him, doomed to an early death in a land that was not his own.

Then she came to him. Stalking through the grass, the blades passing through her body as if she wasn’t there, the tigress walked towards him and stopped a few feet from where he stood rooted to the spot in fear. Startled, he knew there was no point running, but he needn’t have worried. He could see straight away that she was not a wild beast like those his father had shown him on a hunt. It wasn’t just the white fur that had replaced the orange he knew by sight, or the dark brown stripes that decorated her back and legs. It was the shimmering effect he had seen once before in his sleep. Like the Blue Wolf, the tigress didn’t exist in his world. She was just a memory of the creature that had once had life and now walked through the world of spirits.

But he could see her – even if he did only have one eye left.

Was he dead? The thought made him shiver and his bottom lip began to tremble when he felt something warm his skin. It wasn't the sun's rays for the cloudy sky hid the light from him. It was a feeling, engulfing him like the warm water of the spring near his home. It was an aura. An aura emanating from the spirit before him, greeting him.

Outcast shook himself from the vision, using his own energy to claw his way out back into reality. His anger flared once more. His head whipping back to face the tigress, he pointed a finger at her. 'I mean it, Kala. Stay out.'

He didn't have time to defend himself as once more the wave swallowed him up.

The boy watched from behind the tree as the young children played in the stream. For months he had survived by catching small rodents and rabbits, using the skills his father had taught him, but it had been days since he'd caught sight of an animal small enough for him to catch. His stomach growled. Fearing the sound would give him away, he pressed his back to the tree and waited a few moments before braving another look.

The girl was splashing water at the little boy she was caring for. She must have been about Outcast's age, if a little younger. Her brown hair was tied back in a braid and she hitched her skirts up to her knees as she danced in the waters, her smile wide on her youthful face. The child beside her giggled and used his hands to throw droplets at her. Together they were the perfect representation of a happy life, reminding Outcast of what he had been forced to give up.

Anger swelled in his chest and jealousy churned his gut.

It wasn't fair.

A couple approached, the woman carrying a wicker basket in one hand. The man, tall with a dark moustache matching his beard, called the children over as the woman set the basket down on

the bank. They ran towards him, the little boy's arms reaching for the woman while the girl sat down on the grass.

They were a family.

They talked with big smiles on their faces.

They ate the bread and cheese from the basket, nibbled on apples and devoured the berries.

They had everything Outcast didn't.

The tigress, always beside him, sent a burst of energy his way, the aura begging him to be calm, to control himself, but it was too late. The injustice was overwhelming.

'It should be mine.'

Roaring, Outcast tore himself from the forced vision once more and threw the dried meat aside, no longer hungry. He faced the tigress, his shoulders set in anger and his breathing ragged. Power surged within him. It coursed through his veins, hot and euphoric, summoned by his will. The tigress wasn't fazed. She stood her ground in front of him, her blue eyes glowing with ethereal energy as she too channelled her essence. Then she hit him one last time.

The corpses of the man and woman lay in pieces on the bank, parts of their bodies submerged in the cold water that had provided so much glee not moments before. Outcast stood on the bloodstained grass. His skin was drenched in sweat and his chest heaved with sobs of regret. He hadn't controlled himself. Like that day near his home, he had lost himself to the power lurking inside and it had exploded in a blaze of light and fire, slicing through limbs and severing heads from necks as it was unleashed on the world. By the time he had trapped the energy back in his core where it belonged, it was done. The couple had barely had time to scream let alone protect their children who had burst into ash the moment the flames had touched them. Their parents' charred remains were all that was left of the happy family, their offspring having been blown away in the howling wind that signalled the end of Outcast's outburst.

Standing on the bank, his bare feet soaked in blood and gore, he felt bile rising in his throat. What had he done? Wasn't this why his people had banished him? His grandfather was right. He was a demon. A curse. A plague on the land. How could the Blue Wolf ever have wanted him to walk the honourable path of shaman? Wasn't a shaman's meaning of life to protect Mother Nature and all she created? Breaking down in tears, Outcast collapsed to the ground and rubbed at his missing eye as the familiar pain worsened with his guilt. Then he saw it.

The basket had mostly avoided the chaos. It had been blown upside down by the fire and wind, its outer edges blackened and its contents burned to ash like the children. But when he tipped it over, a single apple lay in the grass, untouched by the fire. Outcast picked it up. It was smooth in his hands and a bright, happy red. This time when his stomach growled, he listened to it. Taking a bite of the fruit, he let its juices trickle down his throat, quenching the guilt and forcing the bile back down where it belonged. He was no longer hungry.

'Enough!' he boomed, releasing his energy in a singular blast that whipped leaves from their branches and sent the tree behind Kala leaning backwards at an angle, its roots barely stopping it from being torn from the earth. The tigress' eyes were wide with alarm as she stared at him, her lips curling back to reveal her bared fangs.

Outcast was panting. A smile spread across his face for the first time in years. Never before had he been able to push her from his mind. He could convince her to abandon her underhanded plans for a time, yes, could use his indifference to annoy her so much that she would disappear for a few days, but he had never been able to match her power before. She was an older spirit, more attuned to her gifts, whereas he had never quite grasped his own.

For twenty years he had used his powers to get by, slaughtering for food and maiming for new clothes, not caring if the victims were innocent or guilty. As long as the payment was enough, he didn't ask questions. It was his unique abilities that set him apart from the other Magickers roaming the land, for there were many others like him, but none who hired themselves out as

mercenaries. Those with gifts like his tended to be disillusioned practitioners of faith and hope, pleading with the non-believers to return to the old ways. Outcast wasn't like them. The only thing he believed in was himself, but a part of him had always known he could never beat Kala at her own game.

Perhaps he had been wrong.

Sensing her shocked aura beneath the calm energy she was trying to conceal it with, he tilted his head up in triumph. It would be a while before she got up the nerve to try that again. He gathered his supplies, rolling his blanket up and putting it in the sack before slinging it over his shoulder. His cloak he tied around his waist; the morning air carried with it the promise of a warm day and his cloak would stifle him if worn. Once he had everything on his person, he straightened the leather jerkin he wore over his black tunic and brushed the dirt off the knees of his patched trousers. Then, not bothering to make eye contact with the tigress still glaring at him, he yanked the sword free of the tree and slid it back into its sheath.

Chapter Three

The town was crawling with empire scum. Clad in red tunics with the emperor's emblem stitched over their hearts, they wore their uniforms with a misguided pride almost as repulsive as their clean-shaven faces. Outcast kept his head low as he wandered through the muddy streets, the hood of his fur-lined cloak pulled up to hide his hair and casting a shadow over his disgruntled expression. He made his living roaming from town to town, hiring out his powers for a lofty price, but the presence of the imperial army complicated things. The emperor had made himself perfectly clear on what he thought about people with a particular set of gifts like Outcast's.

The pompous ruler who had invaded from across the Meran sea fifteen years ago was a man of strict religion, and the idea that there were those who had supernatural abilities ruffled his feathers so much that he had declared all of them rebels. Magickers was what he called them. Deemed too unpredictable, too dangerous, to live among normal people, the emperor had demanded they be rounded up and executed for the good of the empire. Outcast had seen many of his kind hanging from posts along the roads or fertilising the fields with their ashes. The only reason he had avoided a similar fate was because he knew the truth of survival: care about yourself and only yourself. It had worked well for him so far.

Walking through the merchant street of the small, once peaceful town, he kept his eye open and his ears alert. He didn't want any surprises. It was against his nature to be so inconspicuous, so hesitant to flaunt his power, but he had one thing he wanted right then and getting into the guards' bad books wasn't it. Spotting the tavern at the end of the street, he released a sigh and headed for it on weary feet. His supplies were getting low after months on the road and he was in desperate need of a warm meal, a soft bed and some strong ale. The guards he passed glanced at him before looking away, his cloak, mud-caked boots and heavy footsteps not enough to capture their unwanted attention. To them he was just another pitiful townsman ending another pathetic day under imperial

rule. Outcast stormed ahead, his mouth already watering at the thought of hot stew and a tankard of the cheapest, strongest slop the tavern had to offer.

A growl drew his gaze to the tigress. She stood beside him as he stopped outside the decrepit building, her claws glinting under the evening sky. Outcast grinned at her obvious disapproval.

‘Just a meal, Kala,’ he muttered quietly, his gaze sweeping either side of the street. The last thing he wanted was an unfortunate eavesdropper overhearing him talking to thin air and reporting it to the uniformed men who governed their town. Satisfied he wasn’t about to be accused of insanity, he spat the last of the Ambago mush from his mouth onto the ground, the slushy substance passing through the tigress’ paws onto the dirt. ‘A man’s got to eat after all.’

The irritated aura she sent out nearly knocked him backwards. The strength of the energy surge reminded him of her abilities, but he stood his ground. He mentally shoved his own triumphant aura back at her, along with the memory of him forcing her out of his head not three days before. The tigress flattened her round ears against her head and lowered the front half of her body to the ground as if preparing to pounce.

‘Don’t.’ He wagged one finger at her in warning.

The aura darkened, a promise of retribution for his disobedience and debauchery. He had felt it before, had spent two decades ignoring her insistence that he accept his fate. He knew you couldn’t force someone to walk their path and the only one he was willing to tread was the one leading him into the tavern. Turning his back on the spirit, he strolled up to the door only to wince as a sharp claw raked a shallow cut from his right shoulder to the base of his spine. Enraged by her audacity, he yanked the cloak from around his neck and stared at the slash the tigress had carved in the fine material. He felt cold air stinging at his flesh through the torn jerkin and tunic, but it was the cloak he was more worried about.

Outcast fixed his stony glower on her, both annoyed that she would dare use up part of her strength to attack him and angered that she had ripped what had been a very valuable cloak. The

sight of guards patrolling the street stopped him from retaliating. The years of wandering alone had taught him to control his heated temper and the memory of the bloodbath that had been his last meeting with a troop of imperial guards prevented him from lashing out at the spirit animal who had just ruined his prized possession. Instead of spitting curses at her, he tilted his chin up in defiance and stormed through the tavern door, feeling blood tricking down his back to stain his tunic.

The stale stench of sweat struck him first when he entered the dimly lit room, its source the two dozen men clustered around oddly-shaped tables and sitting on wobbling stools. Each man was at his own stage of drunkenness, ranging from the almost sober to the comatose. Some were farmers, judging by the rusting tools lying forgotten by their feet and the hopeless expressions on their tired faces. They were skinny and undernourished, unlike the beefier men with a subtle spark in their eyes, landowners and merchants. He had seen their like before, men who had sold out to the invading empire for a price and had more food on their tables every evening than the poorer saw in a fortnight. The healthier of the villagers sat at a long table to his right, nearest to the bar, and they were sharing stories as if they didn't have a care in the world, as if they couldn't see the desolation perching on the stools near the fireplace. The starving, overworked farmers huddled together as close to the flames as their tables allowed, not a word passing their cracked lips, and they stared at their mugs with blank gazes. Outcast's lips curved up in a small smirk at their misfortune and couldn't help but wonder what Kala's reaction would be to see them so segregated and downtrodden.

The sparse candles dotted around the room illuminated the dark beams of the ceiling and the mould-covered walls it sheltered, the orange glow casting shadows on the floorboards and making the mice skittering around the edges of the room seem bigger than they probably were. Outcast wrinkled his nose at the sight of the loathsome creatures and felt the need for violence churning in his gut. He slammed the door behind him, announcing his arrival, and watched as all eyes turned to him. For a moment, nobody moved. With a scarred face, a flap of skin sealing one eye, and mismatched attire, his appearance shocked them all into silence. He had seen it before, had

seen grown men cower at the sight of the sword strapped to his back and the mangled flesh of his disfigured cheek, and he welcomed that fear.

Outcast's hand twitched where it hung by his side, readying itself to fly up and slide his sword from its sheath at the first sign of trouble, but then the farmers returned to their self-pity and the merchants their food, the wealthier tavern-goers having decided that the newcomer wasn't worth their time.

Outcast signalled the man behind the bar for food and drink then found a table near the grime-crusted window. Two men sat on one side, their faces gaunt and their skeletal hands shaking as they lifted wooden spoons of broth to their lips. There were no other seats available so he sat on the other side of the table, lowered his sack of meagre supplies to the floor and folded his arms across his chest, his eye observing the rest of the room. The tavern owner brought his meal over a few moments later then hurried back to the bar, dragging his feet behind him. The empire probably owned him by now, judging by his desolate and broken expression. Almost every penny he made would be paid to the guards outside, leaving the man poorer than most of his customers.

The food was mediocre at best, but it did the trick. Outcast's belly warmed with every mouthful of beef stew and the hard crust of bread went down nicely. He ate silently, watching those around him and pausing every so often to drink from his tankard. The ale was bitter and had a sharp edge to it, burning his throat a little as he swallowed.

'You're bleeding, friend.' One of the men seated across from him gestured to his back with a grubby, dirt-stained hand. 'I saw it when you sat down. You should get that looked at.'

Outcast lifted his tankard and drained it of its contents before signalling the tavern owner for another. He didn't bother replying. He had enough trouble talking to spirits; he didn't want the hassle of making small talk with a man who would be joining that world soon.

'How did it happen?' the man asked then, not insulted by Outcast's refusal to answer his first question. 'It looks fresh.'

Outcast slid the tankard to the end of the table when the tavern owner appeared, then dragged it back once it was full, raising it to his lips and swigging a mouthful.

‘I could help you,’ the farmer pressed. ‘My wife has a way with her hands.’

‘I’m sure she does.’

‘She could help treat your wound.’

‘I don’t need help.’ He rested against the wall behind him, keeping his injured back out of sight. ‘Keep your nose in your own business before I slice it off.’

The man shuddered at the threat and stood from his stool. His friend muttered under his breath, but the farmer brushed the concern away with one hand as he walked sadly to the bar where he leaned on the wood and ordered himself another tankard. Outcast watched him go, not out of guilt but of curiosity. He wanted to see how the two groups of men would react to such a downcast expression. Nobody moved or said a word. They were just too used to despondent characters drowning their sorrows. So, his chance for an entertaining scene stolen from him, Outcast took a needle and thread from his sack and got to work on his cloak. He wasn’t about to throw it away because of one tear and had just mended a third of the slash when the tavern door opened and eight imperial guards strolled in.

‘Your best table,’ the fellow at the front demanded of the trembling tavern owner. Tall with broad shoulders, a bushy dark beard and piercing, grey eyes, the brass pin on his tunic marked him as a sergeant. He watched as the tavern owner pleaded with the merchants to abandon their table for the soldiers, but the men didn’t need much convincing. One glimpse of the swords belted at the guards’ waists and they hurried to escape the building, sliding past the sergeant and his men to the relative safety of the street outside. Of course, they wouldn’t want to upset the men who had bought their lands and lined their pockets with gold. Only the poorer men remained, slumping on their stools and staring into the bottom of their drinks.

‘Ale!’ the sergeant commanded as the guards took their seats, sweeping the trays of half-eaten food onto the floor. ‘And fresh meat. The best you have. Quickly!’

The tavern owner tripped over his own feet as he rushed to fill the order.

‘Hurry, man!’ the sergeant snapped, as the owner struggled to carry enough tankards over without spilling a drop of ale. Once they had been set down, the guards snatched one each and noisily guzzled the rotgut. Trays of meat, breads and cheeses were brought over, the contents disappearing down the men’s gullets. Outcast watched the greedy display, comparing the soldiers’ clean appearance to the dishevelled, ragged farmers seated on the other side of the room. It was interesting to him to see the difference in social class and wondered where he would fit. Then he chuckled, knowing he was above them all in a class of his own.

‘Hey!’ one of the guards shouted. He leapt to his feet, his auburn hair a bunch of tight curls on his head. With one hand he clasped the farmer by his scrawny throat while the other clenched into an angry fist. ‘You made me spill my drink!’

Outcast arched an eyebrow. The farmer he had dismissed had been walking back from the bar and had accidentally collided with the soldier, causing him to lose his grip on his tankard. The foamy liquid had been soaked up by the guard’s uniform, the red material as dark as its wearer’s face.

‘Please, sire.’ The farmer held up his hands, his voice quivering. ‘It was an accident.’

The guard sneered and tore his glare away from the man to meet the gaze of his sergeant. The commander waved a dismissive hand and focused on his meal, slapping meat onto bread before shoving it into his mouth. ‘Well,’ the slighted guard said to his frightened captive. ‘It looks like you’re about to have another accident.’ A hard punch to his jaw and the farmer’s eyes rolled into the back of his head. The guard released his grip, letting the dazed man fall to the dusty floor, and laughed before returning to his table where his sergeant clapped him heartily on the back.

It was a pitiful sight, a man cowering on dirty floorboards while those who had invaded his land took all he had worked so hard for. Still, such was the way of life. Now that his own meal was finished, Outcast packed his half-mended cloak into his supplies along with the needle and thread, then stood up and headed for the door.

‘Hey, you!’ The sergeant had noticed him leaving. ‘Stop.’

Outcast suppressed a growl and halted before the door, but didn’t turn to face the man. If he left now the soldiers would all pursue him. If he waited to hear what the sergeant had to say, he could be on his way hassle-free in no time.

‘What happened to your back?’ the sergeant demanded.

‘Hunting accident. I wrestled with a big cat and she got a lucky swing.’

‘There are no big cats round here.’

‘I wasn’t hunting round here.’

‘That wound looks fresh.’

Outcast closed his eye and willed his temper to remain the small fire in his gut rather than the inferno it was determined to become.

‘Look at his sword, sir,’ another soldier chimed in. ‘That’s a nice sheath and the hilt looks expensive.’

‘Come here,’ the sergeant ordered.

Outcast gritted his teeth and turned to face the table. ‘Why?’

‘Why?’ The grey eyes became angry slits. ‘Because I told you to. Come here. That’s an order.’

‘I don’t take orders.’

‘I am a sergeant of the imperial army!’ he snapped, standing from his stool and puffing his chest out with pride. ‘When I order you to do something, you will bloody well do it! Now come here and give me your sword!’

‘Come here and get it yourself.’

The sergeant’s boots pounded the floorboards as he strode towards him, his outstretched hand holding his own sword. When he was two paces away, he lunged with the blade, but Outcast was ready for him. Latching onto the hand wielding the weapon, Outcast flicked it sharply to one side until he heard an audible cracking of bones then slammed his forehead into his opponent’s nose, breaking it. As the bearded man clutched at his bleeding face, Outcast focused on the soldiers

rushing to aid their sergeant. He dug into a canvas pouch tied to his belt and brought out a pinch of black dust, blowing it into the face of the pockmarked man who was closest to him. Hacking and coughing, the man's eyes rolled into the back of his head and he collapsed to the floor, convulsing in a series of agonising fits with yellow foam spewing from his mouth.

The other soldiers skidded to a halt, their faces pale and their knuckles white as they gripped their swords, their arms shaking. One of them, a rather rotund fellow with two chins and beady eyes, pointed a finger at Outcast. 'M-Magicker!'

The screams of anger and surprise echoed throughout the tavern. The weaker farmers, those who drank to drown their sorrows, edged away to the side of the room, bringing their tankards and mugs with them, observing with startled eyes. The guards, remembering their imperial duty to execute all Magickers, ran forward. Without needing his sword, Outcast rammed one man's temple into the wall, knocking him out cold, then chanted a small incantation to immobilise two others in an invisible tar pit, their feet stuck to the wooden slats beneath them and their arms flailing in horror as they struggled to free themselves.

Outcast smirked at their frightened expressions. The men's boots were slowly being swallowed by the floor, the wood becoming liquid and devouring their bodies one inch at a time. An elbow to the jugular sent one man to his knees, and a simple sidestep let another run straight into a wall at full speed. The man fell flat on his back, groaning and rubbing at his bruised forehead.

Outcast hissed as a knife's tip found the back of his hand and carved a line from thumb to little finger, blood leaking from the wound. Angered by the assault, he glanced at the candle behind his attacker and forced his will into its small flame. The orange fire shot from its wick to engulf the man with the knife, devouring him greedily as he bolted from the tavern, wailing at the top of his lungs for help. The candle returned to its former state, but there was something different about it.

The flame was still.

It didn't flicker or dance. It was simply frozen.

Chapter Four

Peering closely at the motionless flame, he walked towards it and ran a hand through its centre, his fingers passing through the fire. There was no heat, no smell of singed flesh, nothing. It was as if the candle didn't really exist. He looked at the carnage around him to find the rest of the tavern in a similar state. The owner cowered behind the bar, cradling his head in his hands. The farmers huddled against the wall by the fireplace, petrified, while the soldiers lay on the ground, faces creased in pain and curses hovering on lips. One of them was half off the floor, intent on a counter attack, but was stuck midway through the move. The two men trapped in the invisible tar looked almost comical as they strained to grasp a table leg or stool to help pull them out of the strange pool, their flailing arms frozen in place and their eyes bulging in their sockets from fear. Nobody moved and not a word was spoken. It was as if time had simply stopped. Outcast frowned and stared down at his hands.

'It wasn't you,' a sharp voice announced from the open door, the glow of the burning man just visible beyond the woman that was moving towards him. Her heart-shaped face was covered with scars and symbols branded into her cheeks. A mass of tangled, golden braids trailed over one shoulder to reach her belt, while the other half of her hair was shorn close to the scalp. Her bodice was protected by a burnished breastplate, held in place by a series of leather-laced straps, and the blue skirt that touched the tops of her deer-skin boots was slashed from hem to hip, revealing two lithe legs wrapped in leather leggings. Yet what caught Outcast's eye most wasn't her clothing or the collection of knives belted at her waist, but by her deformity. Even though the braids were draped over her shoulder, he could see that the left side of her body was larger than the right. The muscle that ran from neck to shoulder was raised higher than its counterpart, the slope of the arm more rounded, giving her a lopsided form, and her left hand was missing the smaller two fingers. Vibrant blue eyes flashed dangerously at him as his curious gaze lingered on her malformed limb.

'You did this?' he demanded, indicating the statues surrounding him.

The woman nodded, her tone as cold as her glower. 'I did. It seemed the best option to stop the fight.'

'I didn't want it stopped. Put it back.'

'Not until you hear what I have to say.'

'Undo what you did and get out of my face.' Rage burned hot in his stomach at the sight of her amused smile. 'Or did you want to die like the rest of them?'

'One day I will leave this world,' she replied with a gentle nod of her head as she lifted a mug of ale from a nearby table and sniffed at its contents, crinkling her petite nose in disgust. 'That day could be tomorrow or years from now, but I will meet it without regrets.' Her gaze was piercing as she glanced his way, putting the mug down. 'Can you say the same?'

Outcast released a heavy sigh of frustration and rolled his eye at her. The pain in the sealed socket lanced through his head, reminding him his medication was past due. 'You're one of them, aren't you?'

'One of whom?'

'A nag.' He collapsed heavily onto a stool to his right and yanked a mug of his own towards him, tilting it to his lips only to find that the liquid itself was as frozen as the men surrounding him. Grunting, he slammed the mug back down onto the table and patted his trousers down until he located the stash of Ambago he had hidden in one of its pockets. He chunked the clump of leaves into his mouth and chewed furiously, spitting his words past the soggy mess. 'You're one of those self-righteous women who thinks they know best for me. Let me guess, Kala sent you.'

'Kala? Is that your companion?'

'Companion? More like a thorn in my side. Has been for decades. Look, I don't know how she got you to come in here, but let me do you a favour and cut this short.' When he spoke again, he kept his pace slow and steady, his tone condescending. 'I am not going anywhere with you. I like my life. I like this seedy, dirty tavern. I like beating up the local idiots and leaving fear wherever I go. So

you can tell Kala that even if she stays with me for the rest of my days, I will never do what she wants.'

'You don't seem surprised by my powers.' Her disfigured hand played with the hilt of one of her knives. She stared at him, her brow furrowed in confusion.

He shrugged, folding his arms across his chest. 'You're not a threat to me.'

'What makes you so sure?'

'I've met many like you. Men and women with a hint of power who think that they are the big fish in a small pond. They didn't last long. Most fell to the cold steel of my sword.'

'Are *you* a big fish in a small pond?'

'I own this pond.' He spat a slop of Ambago onto the floor.

'That sounds like a challenge.' She placed her feet hip-width apart, hands on her waist. Something glimmered in her eyes, an arrogance that irked him.

'Fine, I'll make it quick.'

'I can't promise the same.' Raising her arms, she kept her gaze locked on his, her lips pressed into a thin line. The air around her shimmered like a mirage, an aura emanating from her body, bright and undulating. Then the world changed. The walls of the tavern fell to the earth, the soil swallowing the wood and replacing it with lush green grass. The men around him dissolved into nothing, taking the rest of their ramshackle building with them. Candles were engulfed by soil, their frozen flames snatched from sight, and the fireplace toppled to the ground where it became a ball of rock.

Outcast blinked and leapt from his stool, half-staggering away from his table as it faded out of existence. He found himself standing in the middle of a field, a cold breeze lashing at his face and an afternoon sun hovering over the horizon, painting the sky orange. Tugging the sword from the sheath on his back, he held it in front of him. 'Who the hell are you? What did you do?'

'You look surprised,' she said mockingly. 'Is that fear I see in your eyes?'

'I fear nothing.'

‘Every man fears. Perhaps I need to dig a little deeper to find yours.’ Holding her good hand in front of her, she muttered an incantation and a staff appeared in her palm, her fingers wrapping around its polished wood. It rivalled her in height, its oak twisted and decorated with carvings of animals and vines, and its top was a masterpiece of craftsmanship. Minute branches sprouted in all directions, only a few inches in length, but impressive nonetheless, while golden strands of power danced across each other, the tendrils spanning the gaps between each branch in a beautiful, intricate pattern. The woman’s lips tweaked, a semblance of a smile playing at their edges. ‘Shall we find out what it is you truly fear?’

Before he could summon a protective barrier, the golden strands shot towards him. They crossed the distance separating him from the woman and latched onto his arm, snaking their way up to his neck and jawline, crawling towards his closed, claw-marked eye.

‘There,’ she said as soon as the tendrils touched the old scars. Her own eyes were closed, the lids twitching as if she were dreaming. She drew in a hiss of breath. ‘So that’s it. That’s how you were chosen.’ Her forehead creased, three horizontal lines of shock marring her skin. ‘You refused your calling.’

Outcast could feel her power seeping into him, probing his mind. His chest ached at the audacity of it all and he released a loud bellow, channelling his anger into a single energy blast that sent her stumbling backwards. The golden strands shrank away from him and flew back to her staff, their shine diminished somewhat by the attack. He met her startled gaze with a furious one of his own. ‘Stay out of my head.’

‘The Blue Wolf,’ she said. ‘One of the most ancient spirits known to this world, so ancient that nobody knows its true name, and it chose you. When you declined, it marked you for the rest of the world to see. Even now it waits for you, but you’ve strayed too far from your path.’

‘I make my own path.’ He wielded his sword, preparing to cut her in two, the bitter breeze becoming a forceful gale at the threat. It whipped his hair around his face, the metal trinkets that fastened each one striking his cheeks and leaving tiny cuts on his nose.

‘It’s not the Blue Wolf you fear.’ She walked towards him, her staff parting the grass with every step as if the blades were caressing it. ‘It’s yourself.’

Bored of her, Outcast lunged and slashed downwards with his blade, intending to carve her head in two, but she uttered a word and the blade was deflected by an unseen force, hitting something solid three feet above the grass; something he couldn’t see, but sounded like wood. His mind began to work through the revelation even as his ears continued to listen.

‘There aren’t many Magickers left in this world.’ She pulled a knife from its loop on her belt and used it to scrape dirt out from under her fingernail. ‘We are few and far between. Hunted to the brink of extinction, we shouldn’t be slicing each other’s throats. The empire will do that for us.’

‘I don’t care about the empire.’

‘The empire cares about *you*. Do you know why the emperor hates our kind?’

Outcast released his hold on his sword, leaving the weapon hanging in mid-air, its edge still stuck. ‘Not my problem.’

‘He knows we are more powerful than he will ever be. He ordered our deaths because we are the ones who can take his stolen throne from him and return this land to the people.’ Her staff in one hand, she held the other out towards him. ‘Join me.’

‘No.’

Her nostrils flared at his quick response. ‘Join me!’ It was almost a command, her voice an impatient bark. ‘Let’s end this tyranny!’

‘I like the tyranny,’ he replied. ‘Where there’s tyranny, there’s chaos, and that means more desperate people willing to pay me to solve their problems. Besides, isn’t banding together and placing yourselves above the common folk going against the Magicker way? I thought you were all self-righteous and self-sacrificing.’

‘This world deserves peace,’ she insisted. ‘We are the ones chosen to protect it, to serve the spirits. If we must combine our strengths and build a force to defend those who need our help, then so be it. It would be better to adapt our traditions for the sake of others than to let innocents die.’

‘If those innocents are too weak to defend themselves, then maybe they deserve to die.’

‘Ignorant fool!’ The staff blazed with golden light, spurred on by her anger, and she tilted its maze of small branches towards him. ‘A world without peace is the end of us all. I will show you your end now!’ Lifting her staff, she balanced it lengthways on an open palm and whispered a series of foreign sentences under her breath. Her voice travelled, circling him, echoing in his ears. Energy crackled with every word. It tickled at the hair on the back of his neck, set his skin tingling. He had never sensed such power from another person before. Taken aback by her strength, he planted his feet firmly on the ground and waited for the perfect opportunity to present itself.

Once again the golden strands shot forward, seeking his flesh, but he held up one hand and summoned the air around him to form an invisible wall, forcing his will into it until it became an invisible, impenetrable barrier.

The woman clenched her jaw and marched towards him, staff extended. Her skirt billowed around her leather-clad legs as she took purposeful strides through the parting grass, her belt of knives glinting beneath the afternoon sun. When she was three paces away, she took a purple-leafed herb from a pocket stitched into the inside of her skirt and crushed it in her fingers, letting the wind pick up the remains and throw them against his barrier. At first he laughed at the feeble attempt, but when the small, crushed leaves wriggled their way through his shield, his smirk faded. One by one, the purple fragments soared towards his face, ramming into his eye and mouth before one wormed its way up his nose and broke his concentration, the barrier collapsing. Sneezing and scratching at his nostril, he was distracted long enough for the woman to land a hard punch to his cheek.

He staggered backwards, rubbing at the welt her strike had left, amazed both by her strength and the fact she’d managed to hit him. Not letting a single second pass, he returned the blow with one of his own.

The woman took a step away, her fingertips wiping blood from her face. ‘How?’ She stared at him, a strange expression furrowing her brow as she smeared the blood between her fingertips.

With a growl she rushed at him, using her staff as a bludgeon. Outcast sidestepped her attacks, knowing that all it would take was one single touch of golden strand to his skin for her to get what she wanted. He avoided a blow to the chest by ducking, the staff flying over his head, and his foot collided with something soft, but when he glanced in its direction, all he saw was more grass.

‘Now!’ she cried and he turned just in time to see a grey wolf bounding towards him through the field. It leapt at him, its paws smacking him in the abdomen and knocking him on his back. One of his hands flew up to grab it by the throat, keeping its snapping jaws from clamping around his face, while the other searched for the pouch at his waist for more of the black dust. Grabbing a handful of it, he threw it at the snarling animal only for the particles to have no effect. They bounced off its snout to float harmlessly to the earth.

‘Hold him down,’ the woman ordered as she knelt beside him, her fingers stroking the wolf’s head behind its ears. ‘Keep him still.’

Outcast wriggled beneath the creature’s surprising weight, his senses picking up on a great deal of energy pressing down on him from the wolf’s form. ‘What is this thing?’

‘It’s a guide. A being more powerful than a living animal who has the sole purpose of protecting me. Don’t you have one?’

‘This thing can touch me.’ He dug his nails into the wolf’s paws, but the creature didn’t even blink. ‘And I can touch it.’ He couldn’t so much as flick Kala’s whiskers, even if he summoned all his power. He had never seen something like the wolf before.

‘Be quiet,’ she snapped at him, lowering her staff toward his face. ‘This could hurt.’

The strands became jagged stems, thorns sprouting along their length. One by one they buried themselves in his forehead, shredding the skin and latching onto his brain. He had never felt pain like it. It wasn’t the burning of the missing eye or the stabbing ache of hunger, but was a raw and shredding agony. He was strangely aware of fingers prodding at his mind, poking every inch of it in search of a way in. Then there was nothing. Just the sensation of an ebbing tide as the strands retreated back into the staff, taking the pain with them.

‘I don’t understand.’ The woman’s face was deathly pale. ‘I can’t see it.’

The wolf glanced up at its master, ears pricked at her distressed voice.

‘Why?’ she demanded of her prisoner, glaring down at him, her hand gripping the staff so tightly her knuckles were white against her skin. ‘Why can’t I see it?’

Grunting, Outcast looked up at the animal keeping him pinned and felt his temper welling in his gut. He concentrated his will into a single thought until a flame took hold of the creature’s fur, spreading like wildfire up and down its body. The animal’s yelp was loud as the magical flames consumed it whole. It whimpered and ran through the grass before vanishing from sight in a puff of smoke. Outcast pushed himself to his feet and brushed the dirt from his patched trousers.

‘You didn’t say a word.’ She was keeping her distance now, backing away as he took slow, menacing steps towards her. ‘No incantation, no herbs, no meditation. Nothing. How did you summon that fire?’

He didn’t need to explain himself to her. What he *did* need was some violent retribution.

‘Stay away!’ she shrieked, outraged and confused.

Conjuring a ball of fire in one hand, he tossed it at her, the embers hungrily devouring her healthy arm as she raised it to protect herself. She tripped over her own feet and landed with a thud on her backside, her disfigured hand desperately trying to put the fire out. When she finally managed it, it was too late to retaliate for he was towering over her, his boot on her throat forcing her onto her back. She struggled for air beneath his foot, her fingers scratching at him.

‘Who are you?’ she managed to splutter. ‘I couldn’t see it. I couldn’t see your future. You’re not one of us.’

‘You’re right about that.’ Pressing harder on her neck, he watched as she fought to break free, as her eyes lost their spark. Then, when she was still and her hands had fell limp, he stalked over to where his sword still hovered in the air and yanked it out of whatever it was keeping it trapped. He glanced left and right, noticing the way the air shimmered around him and how the outer edges of the field were blurred.

It was an illusion, he realised, and a powerful one at that. The last time he had encountered one was almost eight years ago when a travelling Magicker had mistakenly believed he was stronger than the one-eyed man. Breaking the idiot's neck had done the trick and released him. Outcast decided to employ a similar tactic. He spun back towards the unconscious woman, already imagining the joy he would feel driving his sword through her heart, when she sat up on the floor and snapped her fingers. In the blink of an eye she was gone, her field with her, and he was once again in the dingy tavern, surrounded by injured guards groaning as they were released from their paralysis, the two stuck in the tar pit now lying on the floor. The woman had not only cast an illusion, but had sent her spirit to meet him in it. She had never been there, had only been a shadow of herself. A shadow he could hurt. Next time she wouldn't get a chance to snap those fingers and run; he would break them off first.

Chapter Five

The village nestled in the valley was even more desolate than the last. For three days he had been roaming the countryside, trying to avoid the main roads in case the empire's troops were on the lookout for the man who'd openly used Magick to batter a group of guards. That was three days of complete isolation. Even Kala had abandoned him for a while, too disgusted with him to tolerate being around him anymore. She'd come back, of course, she always did, but his time without her was a gift and he wasn't about to waste it. So when he ventured out from one of the smaller forests bordering the western outskirts of the plains, he was glad to see the opportunity just waiting for him in the tiny settlement. The screams had echoed for miles around, drawing him to the scene like a moth to a flame, and now he was walking through the muddy street that made up the entire village, inching closer and closer to the weeping, malnourished residents cowering outside their home.

Outcast lowered the hood of his mended cloak to feel the cold rain patter off his skin. He observed the elderly couple clinging to each other, their poor excuse for shoes being swallowed up by the soggy mud and their bony arms drenched as the heavens continued to bombard them with icy water from above.

'What do we do?' the woman cried, clutching at the man with skeletal fingers. 'It's still in there!'

'I don't know,' he admitted in a quiet, broken voice. 'I ain't never seen nothin' like it before.'

'Get the guards!' Her haggard face was tear-streaked and her white hair plastered to her brow and neck.

'The outpost is a day's ride away at best. I would never make it back before – '

'You have to try! The guards are the only ones – '

'The guards won't help you,' Outcast interjected and strolled up to stand beside them. From his peripheral vision he could see the other villagers huddling in their doorways, their pathetic wooden huts the only protection they had from the elements. Most of them were as emaciated as

the elderly couple, and their eyes were haunted with hunger, their sunken cheeks pale and their skin almost ashen in the grey light of the overcast sky. Despite their poverty, they recoiled as he walked by, repulsed by his disfigured appearance.

‘They have to,’ she whimpered and buried her face in the elderly man’s shoulder; whether out of sorrow for her plight or to protect her eyes from Outcast’s scarred flesh, he didn’t know.

‘The guards don’t care for you,’ Outcast went on without a shred of sensitivity. ‘You’re flies to them, flies that will die soon enough. When that happens, the empire will swoop in and take your land just like they did the others. They’d kill you themselves if they didn’t think they’d cause an uproar amongst the rebels.’

‘There are no rebels left,’ the old man retorted. ‘The empire killed ’em years ago.’

‘Ah, but not all of them.’ He held up a finger. ‘There is still one last faction leading a resistance.’

‘No,’ he said and shook his head. ‘Most of them fell years back and those who survived ain’t gonna help anyone but themselves.’

‘Who are you talking about?’ the woman demanded, getting more frustrated the longer the conversation went on.

‘Magickers.’ The elderly man clenched a fist at the word. ‘Unholy lot. They ain’t never helped us. They only care about themselves, about payment. Even when they fought with the rebels it was for their own gain. Ain’t met a decent one of ’em since the empire crushed the resistance.’

‘Maybe you haven’t, but they’re powerful and good at solving problems.’ Outcast held his head high, revelling in the horror on the couples’ faces as they focused on his sealed eye. ‘So, did you want to make a deal or not?’

‘You.’ The man was barely audible as shock took hold. ‘You’re a Magicker?’

‘I like to think of myself as a legend.’ He dropped his pack at his feet and removed his cloak. ‘Tell me, what’s your problem here? I might be able to help.’

‘For a price.’

‘This isn’t a free world.’

The man glanced at the woman he sheltered in his arms then sighed, relenting. All his fight left him in that breath, his shoulders slumping and the wrinkles in his forehead deepening as he raised his brow in horror. ‘We were out fetching wood for the fire. When we came back, we entered our house and we could just feel that it was... different.’ He shuddered, the woman squealing in terror at the memory. ‘There was a presence in there, something evil. Then I saw it. It was standing in the corner by the chair, watching us, hungry. We ran outside. You showed up not ten minutes after that.’

‘Any idea what it is?’ he asked. ‘What it looks like?’

‘It was...’ the elderly man trailed off as he tried to find the right words.

‘A shadow,’ the woman answered for him, deathly pale. ‘It was a shadow. Taller than any man I’ve ever seen with red eyes and fangs. I can still feel its breath on my cheek.’ Sobbing, she broke down in the man’s arms and he cradled her close.

‘Sounds to me like you have a demon on your hands.’ Outcast looked at the dirt under his nails, nonchalant. ‘Awful things. Very hard to get rid of.’

‘We don’t have much.’ The man gestured to the tiny collection of huts around them. ‘As you can see we’re dirt poor, but there’s food for your belly and you can take whatever you want as payment. Just get that thing out of our house!’

Outcast clicked his tongue, thinking it over. It was true - the villagers didn’t have anything he wanted - but a hot meal would be welcome after three days of travelling through woods and fields, and there were some rather unique herbs growing outside one of the huts that he could use. Finally, he raised one hand over his shoulder and retrieved his sword. ‘A hot meal and some herbs from that garden over there. Give me those and we’ll call it a deal.’

‘Thank you!’ The elderly man nodded enthusiastically, still holding the woman close.

Outcast ignored the continuous stream of gratitude and stalked towards the single level hovel the couple called home. It was made out of pine slats, crude holes carved in two of the walls

for windows, and a thick plank of oak fastened with rope acting as a door. He pulled it open, the smell of poverty hitting him square in the face as he entered the tiny abode: stale bread piled on one window sill, ash from the fire pit that hadn't been used that day, the reek of mould infesting every inch of the place. If it weren't for those damn herbs and three days of boredom, he would have laughed in the couple's faces and been on his merry way, but it was rare to find fresh sprigs of Sproka this far west and he didn't know when he would be lucky to find it again. Good for warding off unwanted spirits, if enough was used he could even keep Kala away for a day or two. He could always use some Sproka in his pack.

The room was dark, the stormy sky outside casting grey light through the holes in the walls. A bed with a straw mattress took up one side near the door, a shelf alongside it holding what he assumed to be the householders' entire life savings – three potted plants, a tin of buttons and a ceramic ewer. He spotted the chair the old man had mentioned. It sat in the far corner, leaning against the wood behind it.

'Hello, Shadow.' Outcast glimpsed the black claws clutching the back of the chair and held his sword up for the creature to see.

The roar shook the walls around him. The sound was inhuman, a cross between a wail and a snarl. Outcast stood his ground as the demon emerged from its corner. It stretched to its full height, its head grazing the roof of the hut, and its long arms raked its talons across the mucky floor. Another roar, primal and full of rage. The villagers cried out in the street, petrified by the sounds coming from within the hovel, but Outcast wasn't ruffled in the slightest. It wasn't the first time he had faced a demon and it wouldn't be the last.

He took a deep breath and looked deep into his mind for that part of him he needed, finding the switch he'd been searching for and giving it a mental flick. The world around him was tinged purple as he entered the trance. He could see the creature more clearly, but it was no longer a shadow. Its form was the same, sure, but there were human elements to it now. Its face, grotesque

as it was to see, had the high-bridged nose of a man in his mid-forties, and its eyes had lost their redness to reveal green irises flashing with anger.

‘Get away from me!’ it hissed, slashing at him with its talons.

‘I just came to talk,’ Outcast said and put his sword on the bed beside him, holding his hands up to show he was unarmed. ‘No blood has to be shed today.’

‘What do you want, Magicker? Your kind kills mine!’

‘I’ve not been paid enough to kill you.’

As if sensing an opportunity, the demon lunged at him, swinging one long arm and aiming its claws at his throat. Outcast grabbed hold of the dark, sinewy wrist with one hand and took a long-handled silver knife from his boot with the other. Flipping the demon over his shoulder, he plunged the blade into its hand and pinned it to the ground. It howled, the high pitch making him wince.

‘It burns!’ it screeched, writhing on the floor. ‘Silver! It burns!’

‘It will do more if you don’t listen.’ He grabbed it by the throat, startling it enough to draw its gaze. ‘I can touch you. I can hurt you. This is not something every Magicker can do, so you know that I’m more powerful than most. All I ask is that you listen to me.’

The demon spat at him and lifted its free arm to slash at his shoulder. Outcast retrieved a second knife and rammed it through the creature’s other palm until the blade was buried to the hilt, pinning the limb to the ground like the first.

‘I didn’t come here to kill you, but I will if I have to. Now, do you want to hear me out or should I start carving myself some demon-chunks for my journey north?’

At first the demon bared its fangs in a vicious snarl, but then it sealed its lips and gave him a curt nod. A few minutes later and Outcast walked confidently out of the hut to the tiny gathering of villagers awaiting his return.

‘Did you get rid of it?’ the elderly man asked. The woman had been passed off to one of the younger girls for support, while the men all huddled to the front of the group, ready to question the Magicker.

‘I did what you asked,’ Outcast said as he sheathed his sword and collected his pack, shrugging his cloak back on.

‘So it’s dead? You killed it?’

‘Not exactly.’

The roar split the air like thunder and they all spun to see the demon emerging from the hut, back in its shadow form, the wounds on its hands from Outcast’s knives mere silvery scars. Steam flowed from its nostrils as its temper blazed in its red eyes and it stared at the horrified villagers, licking its lips.

‘Demon!’ someone yelled and ran away, the others darting to and fro like headless chickens as panic set in.

‘Magicker!’ The elderly man clutched his arm in a weak grip. ‘You said you would kill it!’

‘No.’ Outcast slapped his hand away and shouldered his pack. ‘I said I would get it out of your house.’

The screams were louder than ever as the demon got to work, tearing villagers into bitesize chunks and spraying the ground crimson. Outcast ambled past the hut that had caught his eye and bent to pick a decent amount of Sproka from its bed. Placing the purple leaves and slim stalks into his pack, he licked one finger and held it up to figure out which way the wind was blowing.

North-east.

Perfect.

Chapter Six

Marwich was buzzing with activity as usual. The largest town in the northern plains, it was a place that never slept. Budding entrepreneurs would flock from all over the land to sell their wares in the stall-lined streets that made up the eastern quarter of the town. The vendors boomed their rhythmic chants, each claiming to have the most in demand products of the highest quality, each seller striving to be heard over his competition. The customers drifted from stall to stall, inspecting the jewellery and bolts of fabric, tasting the roasted chestnuts and rose-red apples, sniffing perfume, and flicking through books written in the neatest of handwriting. If you wanted to find something, Marwich market was the place to do it. It had everything on offer, from shoelaces to antique furniture. There was even a section for Magickers to practice their arts for the right price. Marwich wasn't as prejudiced as the other towns of the plains and a huge part of the indiscrimination was down to the man in charge, Wessex. Outcast weaved in and out of the crowd and ignored any stall owner desperately trying to get his attention. He turned a corner and walked down a long, sloping road, entering a four-storey building at the bottom.

The inside of the tavern was decorated to perfection. It was every inch the comforting, warm establishment you wanted it to be. Red cushions adorned every chair, the tables were sanded and polished without a wobbling leg in sight. Paintings hung on the cream walls, little ornaments adorning shelves nestled in corners. The fire pit in the centre of the room was easily as wide as a man was tall, its embers protected by a circle of thick stone that reflected their orange glow. Employees danced around the tables, handing full mugs to their giddy clients and taking orders for food. Outcast nodded at the serving men and women as he wandered towards the booth in the far corner near the stairs. There, sitting comfortably on his cushioned bench behind his table laden with food, was just the man he wanted to see.

'Wessex,' Outcast said. 'You look fatter than ever.'

The man with the auburn beard and green eyes glanced up at him in surprise. His voice was a deep boom rumbling in his chest. 'Outcast? Is that you?'

He nodded.

Wessex chortled and slapped his knee with one chubby hand. 'Old friend! Take a seat!' He wriggled himself to the right so that there was a sizeable space beside him, but Outcast shook his head.

'I'll have my own stool,' he said. 'That bench of yours is straining under your weight as it is.'

'Cheeky sod!' The tavern owner signalled for one of the serving women to bring a fresh jug of ale to share between them then fixed him with a narrowed gaze. 'What are you doing here, Outcast? The entire empire is looking for you right now.'

Outcast shrugged and settled on the chair he'd pinched from a neighbouring table, resting his elbows on its arms and crossing his ankles as he slouched.

'It's a dangerous time for Magickers to be making themselves known. The empire has marked you all out as traitors. You're not just part of the people anymore, gifted as you are, you're targets.' Wessex leaned forward and rested his arms on the table, his expression serious. 'You're supposed to be keeping out of sight. Not everyone is as tolerant and as welcoming as me.'

'They pushed their luck too far.'

The larger man sighed and leaned back on his bench once more. 'I just don't see things ending well for you, my lad. Not if you continue being so reckless. I mean, I don't think you're as bad as the rest of the world seems to think you are, but you're not exactly helping the situation. Your powers are dangerous. You know that more than anyone.'

Outcast's one eye darkened with anger. 'Don't go there, Wessex.'

'Fine, I'm sorry.' Wessex held his hands up in defeat. 'I didn't mean to pick at an old scab. I'm just saying that you're more powerful than any other Magicker I've ever met, and I've met a lot of them. If you're not careful, the empire will catch you one of these days and you'll be done for.'

‘That sounds like a challenge to me.’ He picked up the mug a serving woman set down in front of him and drained it of its contents before refilling it from the jug she had left between the two men.

‘Of course, it does,’ a delicate voice interjected before Wessex could reply. ‘I wouldn’t expect anything less of a stubborn ass like you.’

Unable to hide the smirk from his face, Outcast turned in his chair to see a beautiful woman walking towards him. Her vibrant red hair flowed down her back in glorious curls and the almost see-through pink material of her dress clung to her every curve, mesmerising the men in the room as she sashayed towards the owner’s table. Her skin was tanned from her years travelling on the road and her satin slippers made an almost musical sound when she walked, the anklets she wore adding to the symphony. Her warm honey eyes watched his reaction carefully as she neared him, a predator waiting to pounce. She draped her silk shawl over the back of Outcast’s chair and sat on his lap, her body melding to his. ‘Hello, lover.’

‘Frost,’ he said, his arms instantly going around her slim waist. ‘I didn’t know you were in town.’

‘You would if you read any of my letters,’ she chided and flicked him lightly on the nose with a manicured finger. ‘But then that would require me knowing where you are to send them. You’re a difficult man to find.’

‘Just follow the trail of destruction,’ Wessex suggested, picking up a chicken leg from the platter in front of him. ‘Where the empire is angriest is usually where our friend will be.’

‘Very true,’ she replied without looking away from Outcast’s face. ‘I’ve heard a lot of rumours about the man with one eye during my travels this autumn. They say he’s a callous monster, barely human, with no feelings other than greed.’

‘Accurate description,’ Outcast said.

‘Not exactly.’ Her fingers traced lazy circles on his chest beneath his tunic. ‘We both know that greed isn’t the only thing you feel.’ She leaned in close until he could feel her breath on his ear. ‘Perhaps you need a reminder?’

‘Maybe later.’

His reply didn’t offend her, far from it, and she giggled as she stood from his lap. Taking the space beside Wessex, Frost crossed one slender leg over the other, exposing a great deal of thigh, and smiled. ‘It’s been too long, my love. Too long.’

‘What are you doing in Marwich, Lady Frost?’ Wessex asked through a mouthful of chicken. ‘Last I heard you were heading to the empire training camp in the south. What’s the matter? Didn’t those soldiers enjoy your show?’

‘I was on my way when I had an unexpected visitor.’ She cocked her head at Outcast, the golden streaks in her red hair more visible now that she was sitting beneath a candle fixed to the wall behind her. ‘Kala is very upset with you.’

‘She found you,’ he grumbled, scowling.

‘Yes, and she had so much to tell me. The visions she showed in my mind were shocking.’ This time when Frost met his gaze hers was icy, living up to her name. ‘How could you use your powers like that? You know the risks for us Magickers now. Gone are the days when we were once revered in our communities, charged with the task of speaking with spirits and healing wounds. We’re being hunted now and you’re not helping us shake the wolves from our tails.’

He didn’t reply, choosing to tear a piece of chicken off Wessex’s platter instead, tossing it into his mouth.

‘You need help, Outcast,’ she sighed. ‘Kala was sent to you for a reason. Wessex and I love you dearly – we’re the only ones who can stand being near you and you us – but that doesn’t mean we’re blind to your actions.’

‘I can help with that.’ Her self-righteous tone was grating on his nerves and he fingered the hilt of the knife belted at his waist, glaring at her.

Frost, as always, ignored his threat. 'We're supposed to be neutral, but some of us are more talented than others and have decided to use those talents to slacken the empire's hold on this land and protect the people. I may not be the most powerful of Magickers around, my love, but I am the only one devoted to you. Most would not approve of the way you use your powers, acting for personal gain; it goes against everything we believe in. Outcast, if you don't – '

'Don't bother, Lady Frost.' Wessex placed a hand on her shoulder to still her words. 'There's no getting through to him. Just leave it be for now. Maybe once you've tired him out upstairs he'll act a little more human.'

It looked as if she were going to protest further, but then her eyes caught sight of someone entering the tavern and she beckoned them over. 'Perfect timing! Outcast, Wessex, I'd like you to meet a new friend I encountered on the road. Come, Asta. Perhaps you can talk some sense into him.'

Expecting a scantily-clad teenager shaking with fear at the prospect of dancing for thousands of lecherous men, Outcast was startled when he saw a face he had been trying so hard to forget. He leapt to his feet and drew his sword, holding it in clenched hands and aiming it at the woman's throat. She shook her head at him, mocking him, and wagged one finger at the weapon. She was wearing the same breastplate, bodice and leggings from their last meeting, only this time a green skirt replaced the blue fabric and a bear-hide cloak was fastened around her shoulders.

'There's no need for violence, Outcast,' Asta said.

'What are you doing here?' he demanded, not caring that by drawing his sword he had attracted the attention of the entire tavern.

'I came to speak to you. You may be insane, violent and arrogant, but so am I. I came to you the other night because I sensed your power. You have more than you realise, but you don't know how to use it. You need my help.'

'I don't need – '

‘Shut up and listen to her,’ Frost told him in a stern, unwavering tone. ‘Asta and I had a long chat on our way here and you need to hear what she has to say.’

‘I don’t give a damn what she has to say. I just want her to leave me alone.’

‘Well, that’s not going to happen any time soon.’ Asta held out one hand, her staff materialising from thin air. The beads fastened to the braids mingling with her golden waves glistened under the soft candlelight of the tavern, but the fire in her eyes, the determination, blazed like a furnace. ‘I may not be able to see your future, Outcast, but I can still see everyone else’s. I was in a town to the south of Marwich when I encountered a troop of guards changing shifts. I heard them whispering about a Magicker causing trouble in a nearby village and, since I was curious, I looked into their fates.’

‘What did you see?’ It was Wessex who asked the question, intrigued.

‘I saw death and it wasn’t quick.’ She held Outcast’s gaze. ‘Through the soldier’s eyes, I saw that you will be taken to the capital to meet with the emperor’s right-hand man. He will ask a task of you and the choice you make will determine not only yours, but all of our fates.’

‘Not that again.’ Outcast tightened his hold on the sword’s hilt.

‘Outcast!’ Frost shot to her feet and made to grab hold of his arm, but Wessex held her back, motioning for her not to get involved.

Asta narrowed her eyes at Outcast’s hand resting on his sword hilt, the blue irises flashing with anger at the challenge. ‘Don’t fight me. I am not your enemy, Outcast, but I can be your ally. I will ask you one last time. Join me and fight for the resistance. Help us to return this land to the people.’

‘It’s funny, but I’m sure I’ve heard imperial soldiers spouting the same rubbish in the name of their emperor,’ he retorted with a smirk. ‘Don’t they say that their beloved leader came to this land because it once belonged to his ancestors? Now the Magickers who supposedly threaten his rule are rallying together to destroy him, forgetting their pledges to honour the land and those who

live within it. That's not very selfless, is it? Such a shame that nature's favourite protectors are using their gifts to slaughter enemies instead of sniffing herbs and babbling chants.'

She bristled at his words, but her expression remained determined. 'We have been forced to adapt, but no matter what we have to do, we will do our best to uphold our beliefs. We will never forget our duties to the spirits, Outcast. When this is all over, we will return to our ways and be the spiritual leaders of our tribes. Neither above nor apart from our kin.'

'Sounds like you're making excuses.' Outcast rolled his shoulders, preparing to fight. 'And I'm getting really tired of hearing your voice, so shall we do this already?'

'I'm not an illusion anymore; I'm real and I'm strong.' She cocked her head at him as her hand gripped her staff. 'I don't like you any more than you like me, but the future of our kind rests in your blood-stained hands, so until I know that my people are safe from this empire, I'll be keeping a close eye on you.'

'Not if you're dead.' He aimed his blade for the soft flesh of her throat, intending to slash it spine-deep, but the pointed tip met a metal breastplate instead. The man towered over him, his torso thicker than an oak tree, his arms bulging with muscles, and his sternum at Outcast's eye level. With red hair tamed into one long braid, the stranger glowered down at him, his bushy beard concealing the lower half of his face.

'Move,' Outcast commanded, not lowering his sword.

The man didn't budge an inch. Instead, he reached to the leather belt at his waist and removed a short-handled axe. The curved edge had been sharpened, the metal lovingly polished. If there was one thing Outcast could almost respect, it was a man who cared for his weapons, but this man was in his way. The two of them squared off against each other, neither one willing to back down.

'Enough.' It was Asta who manoeuvred herself in between them and pushed them apart with one hand on each of their chests. She gazed up at the bearded man, her voice softening. 'That's enough, Leif. No fighting today.'

The man named Leif blinked and backed away, sliding his axe into his belt once more. Asta returned her attention to the dark-haired Magicker still itching for a decent fight. 'You too, Outcast. No fighting.'

'I don't take orders from you. I don't take orders from anyone.'

'It's not an order, it's a warning. Let it go before I force you to.'

Outcast brandished his sword and planted his feet hip-width apart, readying himself for an attack. Asta's lips curled into a smile and she tilted her staff forward, its strands firing into life and dancing around the wood as a river of embers. A bitter wind swept through the tavern, chilling those seated at tables and rattling the paintings hanging on the walls. Outcast shivered at the icy air, but before he could defend himself, the wind became a full-blown gale and shoved him backwards. He soared through the room and crashed through a lead-paned window, landing in a heap in the street outside. He was just scrambling to his feet when Asta appeared on the stones before him.

'I have more gifts than you know,' she said, staring down at him with an imperious expression. 'And you *will* listen to me.'

How is Shamanism represented in Fantasy Fiction?

Introduction

'We all have energy, power, within us.

We have the power to create, we have the power to destroy.'

(Endredy, 2009, p63)

This thesis is to be an investigation into the practice of shamanism and an analysis of its representation in fantasy fiction. The aim is to evaluate the use of shamanism in fantasy fiction and the various forms used to represent it in both narrative and characterisation. To achieve this, three novel series that belong in the genre will be used as evidence, and the relevant elements incorporated in them to be discussed at length. These novels are split into two groups: those that are evidently about shamanism, and those that do not openly refer to the practice, but still retain elements of it. Those who practice shamanism will be a pivotal aspect of the work, as will be the fictional characters who emulate the core traditions, functions and actions of these practitioners, as documented by academics, spiritualists and active shamans, all of whom have written articles and guides on the subject.

The novels used that incorporate shamanism and the practitioners as clear features in their plot, character and background, are *The Clan of the Cave Bear* by Jean M. Auel (1980) and *Shaman of Stonewylde* by Kit Berry (2012). In comparison, the novels that contain elements of shamanism to be used are those in the *Soldier Son* trilogy by Robin Hobb (2005-2008). Finally, these novels will be compared to my own creative piece that accompanies this thesis, *Transcendent* (Ivatt, 2016).

To begin with, the term 'shamanism' will be defined and the practice explored, so that the elements that are highlighted in the above-mentioned novels have context as they are being analysed. In addition, as to clear up any confusion, another practice – occultism – will also be studied and compared to shamanism, as these two practices share mutual elements that need to be defined

so that the analysis of shamanism in fantasy fiction remains focused, whilst also providing a definitive line between shamanism and occultism that will be used to discuss the representation of the former in the chosen novels used. Along with this, the shamans themselves will also be defined in order to provide a strong foundation for the sections that follow, wherein the plot, abilities and characters used in the novels, as well as those from the creative piece will be deconstructed and their relation to shamanism examined.

It is expected that similarities will be found between the novels investigated here and in my novel *Transcendent*, but also that there will be either subtle or obvious differences as well, providing an interesting point of comparison and varying degrees of representation of the practice in the genre. At the end of the thesis, there are several appendices that will be of interest: a map of the world used in *Transcendent*; a synopsis of *Transcendent*; and a list of other fantasy novels used as research for this work, along with examples found in them of shamanistic elements.

Shamanism: A definition

In order to discuss how shamanism is represented in fantasy fiction, it is important to first define the term, which in itself is a challenging task as there are many geographical and historical variations that have been debated by academics for centuries. Perhaps the closest, most generalised and widely accepted definition was documented by Roger Walsh in *The World of Shamanism: New Views of an Ancient Tradition*, where he states:

‘Shamanism can be defined as a family of traditions whose practitioners focus on voluntarily entering altered states of consciousness in which they experience themselves or their spirit(s) interacting with other entities, often by traveling to other realms, in order to serve their community.’ (2007, p15)

As far as definitions go, it can be argued that Walsh has successfully summarised a term that has different interpretations around the world. Cooke and Hawke, in their work *‘Shamanism and the Esoteric Tradition’*, add to this by stating that shamanism ‘emphasizes visionary experience, and holds belief to be irrelevant and unimportant.’ (1992, pxiv) Therefore, shamanism is not a religion, but a doctrine of beliefs and traditions that relate to the supernatural, spirits and nature.

There are several fundamental aspects or elements that can be found in each form of the practice: the belief that all living things have a spirit (animism); that you should worship nature (paganism); that some material things possess life (hylozoism); and that the universe is a sentient being that has a mind (panpsychism). Michael Harner, a scholar who has both documented and personally experienced shamanism, defines the practitioners as ‘keepers of a remarkable body of ancient techniques that they use to achieve and maintain well-being and healing for themselves and members of their communities’ (1990, pxvii).

When considering how such a practice is represented in fantasy fiction, the most pivotal aspect this thesis aims to discuss is the shamans themselves. Again, their roles have been found in

numerous variations depending on where they are situated geographically and the time they lived in, but just like the practice itself, these shamans also share similarities both in function and methods.

In the shamanic view, everything is connected spiritually and the shamans are people who can tune into these connections and use them to benefit others. They are healers, diviners, storytellers, dancers, psychologists, spiritual leaders, herbalists, artists, advisors, and intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds. They liaise with the recently deceased, the higher beings, animal guides and spirit helpers of nature, among others, and they do so out of an altruistic devotion to their role, the spirits, and the welfare of their community. It is this sense of duty and the tasks they undertake that formed the basis of the anti-hero in *Transcendent*; or rather, the sense of duty and tasks that he, Outcast, is determined to avoid, as will be discussed later.

The character archetypes set out in Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey* (2007) are useful in beginning to define Outcast's function as a character, not only because they give an insight into his development, but also because they can be applied to the role of a shaman, which is key to both *Transcendent* and to help shape a definition of shamanism. Vogler states that there are eight common character archetypes, though there are many more, and these archetypes play a part in *Transcendent* – the more relevant being the Hero, the Shadow, the Threshold Guardian and the Ally. But characters are not restricted to one archetype; they can be a mix of several. For example, Asta is an Ally, as she aids Outcast in his tasks, but she is also a Threshold Guardian, as she tests him and has been known to create obstacles in his plan to be a wandering, morally ambiguous, mercenary for hire. Likewise, Kala is an Ally and Threshold Guardian, but also symbolises the Shadow archetype, as she is a representation of all the qualities and duties Outcast has turned his back on. It is through her character as well as his own that the reader can see the repressed feelings, the regrets, and the guilt that he carries inside him, though he tries to deny them, which is a key aspect of the Shadow.

Just as these archetypes can be seen through the characters and their interactions in *Transcendent*, they can also be used to help define the role of a shaman. The archetype of the

Mentor is one that is 'closely related to the idea of the shaman' (p46, 2007), as they are guides to their people who aid and train those in their community, and are teachers and motivators. They also travel in dreams and visions to bring stories back to their people and, according to Vogler, the Mentor archetype often helps the Hero through vision quests. The Mentor is just one archetype that is linked to the shaman role. Another, arguably, is the Threshold Guardian, as shamans can block paths that are either dangerous or unacceptable, and can use their status to instruct and guide their people to avoid such risks. Kala takes on this role, because Outcast – who embodies the Hero, Threshold Guardian, and Shadow – refuses to accept such responsibility as a guide to his people.

Perhaps one of the more interesting points to note when considering the definition of shamanism – and one I intend to explore in the novels I selected for this thesis - is the idea of rebirth and how it relates to one becoming a shaman. It begins with a symbolic or spiritual death, before the person is reborn on the 'earthly plane' (Laughlin and Rock, 2014). According to author, James Endredy, a researcher and mentor of shamanism, in his book, *Shamanism for Beginners*, the basic principle of becoming a shaman is the 'Sickness/Death/Rebirth phenomena' (2009, p58). He goes on to say that it isn't just about living through a symbolic or imaginary death, but 'a psychic death of who they are' (2009, p59). If they have been struck down by a sickness, it will be one that can only be cured by themselves. They may lose a physical part of their bodies during the initiation process, but this will become a mark of their power as a shaman as well as proof that they have been chosen. Endredy also adds that the initiation can be an out-of-body experience; one where the initiate returns with an expanded knowledge with which they are 'obligated to serve the human community for the rest of [their] life' (2009, p60). This obligation is another aspect to be discussed throughout this thesis, as it is one of the key conflicts of Outcast's character.

Shamanism vs. Occultism

As previously mentioned, there is another practice that is more widely known and used in the fantasy genre that needs to be addressed before an in-depth analysis of shamanism in fantasy fiction can be discussed – occultism, which is another practice that has several variations and interpretations, ranging from the different ways magic is sourced to its physical form and use. Perhaps the most popular and constantly used inspiration for magic systems in fantasy fiction, these variations of occultism share many similarities to shamanism – for example, it also relates to paganism - but one central aspect is the idea of magic itself and all the factors that come with it: consequences, source, and range of abilities. As Orson Scott Card states in *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy* (1990), there must be consequences and limitations to using magic, otherwise the reader will think that anything is possible (p47); a notion I kept in mind when analysing the novels by Auel, Berry and Hobb, as well as my own work.

Like shamanism, occultism is a practice that includes the use of extra-sensory perception, spiritualism and divination, but it also focuses on the idea of magic as an ability rather than a belief in an honoured practitioner of the community. While a shaman would be seen as a revered, respected and integral part of society, chosen specifically for his role, a practitioner of the occult would be someone who either showed natural ability for it, or who studied to reach their position. The key difference to be highlighted between the two practices is the idea of choice. Shamans generally do not have a choice as to whether or not they assume their role; they accept it as their fate. On the other hand, occultists not only choose what part they play, but also how they play it and why. In *Transcendent*, Outcast goes against the path fate wants him to tread, opting not to become a 'Magicker' and instead uses his abilities for personal gain: this is practically a sin in shamanic culture, but almost expected in certain strains of occultism.

What gives Outcast an edge over other Magickers, and is key to his character development, is that he can enter trances at will and can manipulate his abilities to suit his own personal gain. It is

this use of his natural gifts for his own needs that makes his character the embodiment of what this section of the thesis is discussing – shamanism vs. occultism. It is through his experience of the intersecting worlds, his unique understanding of his abilities, and his interactions with other Magickers that help to demonstrate the journey aspect I wanted to include in my work, as well as emphasise the differences between honouring a chosen role (shamanism) and using one's powers for personal gain (occultism).

Not only do the two practices share similarities when it comes to magic and function, but they also share something much more important. Dion Fortune, author of *What is Occultism*, mentions the trance state and its relevance in what she calls occultism, writing: 'there are states of consciousness which transcend the normal, and when these states prevail, we can discern forms of existence with which normally we have no contact' (2001, p8). According to Fortune, the trance state plays an important part in the occult and for the mediums and seers who practice it, yet the ability to induce, experience and contact others through a trance is arguably the most notable aspect of shamanism.

These similarities are vital in order to examine shamanism and its representation in fantasy fiction. You not only need to understand what the practice is to identify its appearance in novels, but you also need to appreciate the difference between it and its widely-used counterpart, occultism, so that the two are not confused throughout the following discussion. The former is a belief system, a collection of traditions spanning generations and continents, where the idea of magic is formed through a collective belief and faith in the practitioner's abilities. The latter is a series of personal experiences, normally studied to gain more knowledge, and has been known to either be 'light' or 'dark' in magic and intent, where the magic is either observable, tangible or evident; it does not rely on a communal agreement that it exists.

Another point to mention is how archetypes fit in with occultism. Just as the Mentor is related to shamans, it is also linked to occult practitioners in fantasy fiction who guide and train. As well as the Mentor, characters who practice the occult or other versions can be seen as the

Shapeshifter, as they can be misleading and because 'Wizards, witches and ogres are traditional Shapeshifters in the world of fairy tales' (p59, 2007). Although there appears to be a somewhat hazy line separating the two practices, one difference is the idea of duty versus personal gain – a conflict that was paramount to the creation of Outcast's character and the fictional world of *Transcendent*, which will be discussed after the analysis of the selected fantasy novels.

Shamanism in *Clan of the Cave Bear*

The first novel to be analysed is *Clan of the Cave Bear* by Jean M. Auel. It follows Ayla, a young girl born of the Others, who is accepted into a clan of cave people and must learn their ways. Her mentor and father figure, Creb, is the Mog-Ur of his clan; a Mog-Ur being a shaman. It is Creb who performs all the sacred rites and traditions of his people, who performs soul-healing to chase away sickness, and who is a pillar of his community. Disfigured after a difficult birth, he later lost an arm and an eye in a bear attack, but it is these deformities that have added to his status as Mog-Ur, making him someone to both fear and respect. The novel is set in prehistoric times, which arguably defines it as a work of fantasy fiction, as Auel has had to imagine and create most of the settings, characters and rules of magic based upon the few anthropological and archaeological facts accrued by others over the years. Yet despite this, Auel has managed to mould a viable and intriguing world for the readers to sink their teeth into, all the while keeping it as accurate as possible.

As mentioned earlier, shamanism is a belief system, not a religion, and Auel represents this in her novel many times over. For example, at the end of the work, Ayla is sentenced to suffer a death curse, meaning she would be dead, not seen or heard by any living being ever again. Creb's successor, Goov, performs the rite after Creb's death, and Ayla finds that the eyes of the other clan members 'became glazed and unseeing' (1980, p498). Her adopted sister, who idolised Ayla and loved her dearly, also goes 'blank' (1980, p498), implying that this death curse is very real. However, out of desperation to protect the child she is being forced to leave behind, Ayla pleads with the former clan leader, Brun, to keep her son safe, and he gives her a hint of a nod, acknowledging her plea and revealing to the reader that the death curse isn't as magical as they have been led to believe, that Ayla can indeed still be seen and heard by others, and that their avoidance of her is by choice and custom. Through this scene, Auel is putting forward the concept that what was 'magic' to the clan was simply formed from generations of traditions, superstitions and belief, but not necessarily from a supernatural source. As detailed in the previous section of this thesis, shamanism

is founded on the idea of belief, whereas its counterpart, occultism, centres around a supernatural foundation of talent and wells of power. Through the revelation that Ayla realises the power she and the clan believed to be magical in nature and provided by the spirits is no more than a set of beliefs passed down through the generations, Auel is defining the line between the two practices and affirming the definition of shamanism as a belief system rather than a religious practice.

Perhaps an element of shamanism not usually considered that is represented in Creb's character is the idea of androgyny: where the shaman does not identify with a particular gender. In his work *Mephistopheles and the Androgyny*, researcher Mircea Eliade cites shamans as an example of 'ritual androgyny' (1965, p144-145), with the shaman uniting both their masculine and feminine sides. Creb not only holds status in the clan as a masculine, authoritative figure, but also has the nurturing and caring side most attributed to the females. In Brun's mind, Creb transcends gender altogether as it is his role as Mog-Ur that identifies him: Brun 'had almost ceased seeing him as a man' and 'only as the great magician' (1980, p51).

Androgyny is found in various shamanic societies, whether it be a complete union of the genders or a blurring of the lines between them. In 1904, American anthropologist Waldemar Bogoras told of shamans of the Chuckchee tribe being 'soft men' who were similar to women: they lost their fighting spirit, strength and stamina, trading them for stories and a maternal nature for their people (p408). Auel emphasises this in Creb who never hunts with the other men, but remains behind to teach, tell stories and care for his people alongside his sister, Iza, the medicine woman.

Another aspect of shamanism that Auel incorporates to a substantial degree is the relationship between Creb and the spirits. As Mog-Ur, he has a faithful and respectful attitude towards the entities that guide and protect his people. To him and his clan, these spirits expect reverence and abhor insolence. Every earthquake, every turn of bad luck, is attributed to these spirits being angry. When Broud, the newest and cruellest clan leader, demands that Ayla be death-cursed, Ayla believes that his unfounded request upsets the spirits so much that it results in an earthquake that kills Creb, their most powerful and beloved member of the clan (1980, p493). This

notion has made a constant appearance throughout the novel, with Creb and other members of the clan believing that it was disrespect that destroyed their original cave, forcing them to find another, and coming across the injured infant, Ayla (1980, p12).

Despite the spirits being almost deified to Creb and his people, as Mog-ur he has a close bond with them. This is a common theme found in many variations of the practice, where the shaman has 'a personal relationship with the spirits' (Williams, 2010, p2). Indeed, Creb has such a personal connection to the guardian spirit of their clan, Ursus the Cave Bear, that he likens it to a part of himself; an extension of his being that enables him to perform his role. It is his power animal, and his disfigurement from the bear attack acts as a mark of the cave bear's approval, a symbol that the spirit has accepted Creb as one of its own, to be guided and protected. It is Creb himself who performs the Naming Ceremonies in Ursus' honour. He receives and interprets messages from the spirits in order to declare a child's power animal (1980, p88-91). Only the Mog-Ur can do this task.

In *The Writer's Complete Fantasy Reference*, Maurer and Wright stated that 'acquiring an animal guide or familiar is important in many kinds of magic and spiritualism' (1998, p80-83), whereas anthropologist and author Michael Harner claims they are 'a fundamental source of power for the shaman's functioning' (1990, p43). No matter how it is said, several academics and researchers - like Maurer, Wright and Harner - all agree that a power animal or spirit guide is a well of power for the shaman. However, it is important to note that just because these beings give the shaman strength, doesn't mean they should be taken for granted. You cannot control a power animal, but through the shared connection the being can re-experience life through you and, therefore, offers its protection in return. As far as Creb is concerned, he believes his deformity is a mark of his power, that his 'wasted body was given to him so that he could take his place as intermediary with the spirit world' (1980, p16), and that to bear the scars from the cave bear is a mark of Ursus' protection and guidance.

One ability that is prominent in shamanism is the ability to heal others, either by use of ceremonial chants and a mixture of healing herbs, or by asking the spirits to aid the shaman in the

treatment of a patient. For example, in his book *The Urban Shaman*, Serge King describes the Hawaiian Huna shaman's ability to instantly heal a broken bone, as long as he has faith and enough energy (1990, p24). Other shamans, like the Jivaro Indians, used magical darts or spirit helpers to suck the bad spirits out of a sick patient (Harner, 1990, p16). In Auel's novel, when his sister, Iza, is sick and bedridden, Creb calls 'on every spirit he knew to strengthen her life essence' (1980, p445), combining his respectful requests with formal motions of his good arm and the painting of symbols on her body with a red-ochre paste mixed with bear fat (1980, p451). Instead of relying on just natural remedies, he uses his status and knowledge as Mog-Ur to appeal to the spirits: a key element of healing in shamanism.

A final point to mention in regards to Auel's work is the emphasis of shamanic practice as opposed to occultism. Creb, as the chosen Mog-Ur, did not stumble across his powers and train himself to be better. He was selected by the Cave Bear spirit, Ursus, and his knowledge was formed from the collective memory of the generations that came before him. This is shamanism. If he had a natural ability that had no relation to his power animal or the spirits, and it was in fact an innate part of him, then it could be argued that the supposedly magical abilities he shows share occultist roots. However, by showing Ayla's comprehension of the non-magical reality of the clan's beliefs, Auel is steering the reader away from the idea of the supernatural and towards the beliefs prevalent in the prehistoric era. Also, not every member of the clan or the other clans they encounter along the way demonstrate any abilities that belonged specifically to the Mog-Urs, implying that to have that kind of power you must be chosen for it. Again, this is shamanism, and the lack of personal gain emphasises this.

To summarise the analysis of her novel, Auel may not have incorporated all elements of shamanism and mainly used the relation to spirits, the traditions employed by Creb, and the societal structure of a shamanistic culture, but her attention to detail in Creb's character and the subtle differences in Ayla's that challenge the idea of magic as reality, are excellent representations of shamanism. She has focused on the more important abilities that are widely recognised as being

part of the practice: healing, power animals, androgyny, the importance of showing respect to the spirits, and various ceremonies. Although, when compared to the other novels used in this thesis, Auel's novel does not rely on Creb's alleged 'magical' abilities to propel the narrative forward or add to the plot as a whole, she does include his powers to add to his character. This is done while remaining true to what Harner and other experts claim to be a vital part of the shamanistic practice, and not getting confused with occultism.

Shamanism in *Shaman of Stonewylde*

In *Shaman of Stonewylde* by Kit Berry, several aspects of shamanism can be found as recurrent themes. The use of power animals as both guardians and messengers is prominent, as are the specific abilities attributed to shamans and the importance of their role in society. Unlike Auel, Berry sets her novel in a modern setting, placing her characters in a rural community known as Stonewylde, where the blend of shamanism and modern living is seamless.

There are two characters in Berry's work that take on the role of shaman: Clip and Leveret. Clip, as an older man and experienced shaman, is perhaps closer to Creb in character, while Leveret is Clip's apprentice and the teenage girl destined to take over his position when he dies. They live in a rural community that shuns most of modern life, except for using the internet to promote their crafts and wares. Clip, like Creb, is a man of power and respect. Together with Yul, his son-in-law and leader of their community, he governs Stonewylde and protects it from harm. It is only when Clip dies at the end of the novel, and Leveret suffers a terrible fall off a cliff, that she takes up his place as shaman of Stonewylde. Just as Creb believed his deformity gave him power and marked him as Mog-Ur, Leveret finds that the blindness caused by her fall has given her the 'true sight, and she would not falter or stumble' (2012, p462). Leveret, although having suffered a great deal at sixteen years old, had become more powerful than before. Her fall from the cliff only to rise stronger than ever is a form of rebirth: another popular part of shamanism, as it can be seen as a form of initiation.

What is interesting to note about Leveret and Clip's roles as shamans is that they focus on more traditional abilities - visions, story-telling, healing, and trances – as opposed to acting as a direct intermediary between the mortal world and the spirit world. Yes, they do receive messages from spirits and interpret them, and they do journey to the other worlds for guidance, but the impact on their community on a daily basis is more practical. According to Edith Turner in her article, *Shamanism and Spirit*, (2004), 'shamanism provides powers that are greater than the ordinary physical powers we possess in everyday life', and both Leveret and Clip demonstrate this. Alongside

Clip, Leveret performs stories for the people, using herbs, lights and costumes to make the tales come to life. She is also known for being a great herbalist with intuitive healing gifts, a counsellor for all villagers on matters of home, health, and spirits, and for her use of trances. Another ability associated with shamanism, the ability to enter and maintain a trance was not investigated in depth in *Clan of the Cave Bear*, except for Creb and Ayla's ingestion of a herbal mixture in order to link their minds with other Mog-Urs (1980, p427). However, Berry does use it frequently with Leveret.

Margaret Stutley, an author and expert on world religions, defines a trance as a non-conscious state, where 'the shaman is in a non-ordinary psychic state which in some cases means not a loss of consciousness but rather an altered state of consciousness' (2003, p28, cited Reinhard, 1975). To add to this definition, Endredy writes that a trance is 'a state in which the soul seems to have passed out of the body and into another state of being' (2009, p96). The shaman enters this state in order to gain knowledge or power, and to help other people. Many experts, such as Harner (1990, p21) claim that the shaman specialises in a trance that will allow his soul to leave his body and travel to the Upper or Lower worlds. He goes on to say that there are two levels of consciousness that can be attributed to shamanism: the OSC (Ordinary State of Consciousness) and the SSC (Shamanic State of Consciousness). The SSC is the state in which the shaman can see the unordinary reality of the world around him, including spirits, animal guides and messages from other beings, whereas the OSC is what the shaman returns to upon completing his work.

Each shaman would have a different experience within the SSC. Some would see it as a dreamlike experience that feels real – such as the communal trance Clip and Leveret induce with other villagers (2012, p202-205) – while others simply reach a level of ecstasy. The central concept of the state is to see the world around you differently, to have an altered perception of the normal.

There are several methods one can use to enter the SSC. These can range from the ingestion or inhalation of hallucinogenic substances, to meditation and the focus of will. Some shamanic cultures used rhythmic drumming to induce a trance or even a combination of sacred dances and chanting. Berry incorporates all of the above in her novel, with Leveret throwing herbs into a fire to

create aromatic smoke (2012, p314), and Clip using a shamanic drumbeat to entrance his apprentice (2012, p88) in order to send her on a journey quest into the Middle World. In this trance, she enters through an opening like a tree tunnel and is guided by her power animal, Raven, who reminds her that everything is connected, before she witnesses what she soon learns is an ominous vision of bad things to come (2012, p88).

Another thing to consider with shamanic trances is their purpose. Yes, they are used to alter perception and to visit the other worlds, but they are also used to communicate with spirits and other beings. It is through a trance that Mother Heggy, the deceased Wise Woman, comes to Leveret, encouraging her to take her rightful place as both shaman and Wise Woman (2012, p146), and it is Mother Heggy to whom Leveret begs for protection (2012, p160).

As much as spirits and trances aid a shaman, there are other tools and abilities they can use to perform their tasks. As mentioned earlier in this analysis, one of their functions as a spiritual leader is to tell stories to their community. Usually these stories have a power of their own and entrance the audience. In fantasy fiction, this can be literal entrancement, as Leveret and Clip demonstrate when they perform a story web for the people of Stonewylde (2012, p191). Through this exercise, they are not only relating a piece of history to their people, but also teaching morals and sending messages. It is the shaman's function to remember each story so that the next generation can be told.

A shaman's attire can also be helpful. It is possible to weave protection and good thoughts into material so that the wearer is kept safe; a concept used by Clip when he gifts Leveret his cloak made from the feathers of his power animal, as it had helped him journey to the other realms (2012, p348). Leveret also uses this skill of merging magic with material, sewing her own Wise Woman costume and putting her magical intent into each strand (2012, p215). As well as this, she makes amulets of protection for her nieces (2012, p543), which is reminiscent of the amulets Creb and Iza make for the children of the clan (Auel, 1980, p68-70).

An interesting addition to Berry's use of amulets is the reasons various characters employ them, which assists in defining the line between shamanism and occultism in fantasy fiction. When Leveret's youngest niece, Bluebell, is told by an old hag that there is an amulet on a hill that is harmful to others, Bluebell uncovers a toad bag talisman in the ground and destroys it for fear it will harm her family (2012, p549). We soon discover that this particular talisman was not made with evil intentions and its destruction eventually leads to the children's mother, Sylvie, being poisoned and killed, although Leveret assures the girls that this was fate's plan and that nobody is to blame. The hag who deceived the child is one of the three old sisters who are bitter of Clip and Leveret's status and use their own powers – powers that they draw from the world around them and summon for personal gain – in order to wreak havoc in the community by murdering Sylvie. From this we can see that while Leveret is a shaman who believes in destiny, respecting the world and its spirits, and was gifted with her abilities, the three hags are women who have studied their arts and used them to benefit themselves: this is a representation of shamanism (Leveret) vs. occultism (the hags).

As well as trances, story-telling, journey quests and tools used to aid a shaman, Berry also uses power animals. Unlike Auel, who deems these spirits as sentient almost-deities who choose their followers and are there for guidance and protection, Berry does almost the same except that these spirits are not as godlike or unreachable to humans. An example of Berry's is the white-tailed crow that adopts Leveret and acts as her power animal. This crow warns her of danger, cawing when her hostile brother approaches her cottage and even attacking him when he ignores her advice to leave (2012, p218). It is a guardian and doesn't necessarily get too involved in the events of the novel, only swooping into action when it feels Leveret is threatened. This notion of spiritual protection is further reinforced by Harner when he states that 'the power animal is a purely beneficial spirit... It only comes to you because you need help' (1990, p68).

It is also possible in some shamanic cultures for the shaman to transform into the body of their power animal or shapeshift parts of their own forms in order to access their power animal's

abilities. Leveret does this to escape an attacker when she changes into a hare so that she can protect her life and her honour as a shaman and Wise Woman (2012, p423).

Overall, Berry utilises the more practical aspects of shamanism in her work, while incorporating the fundamental spiritual beliefs into a modern setting. There is still the contrast between shamanism and occultism, albeit more obvious than in Auel's novel, and the emphasis on spirits is not as sacred or as important to the Stonewylde community as it is to Creb's clan.

Shamanism in the *Soldier Son* Trilogy

With the *Soldier Son* trilogy by Robin Hobb, the protagonist is not explicitly referred to as a shaman, but as a 'Great One' of the Speck people. Nevare, a former soldier from a well-off family, used to be a good-looking and devoted young man who had his whole future ahead of him. However, after his father allowed him to be trained by an old enemy, a tribesman with shamanic tendencies, Nevare has a strange encounter with an entity who he calls the 'Tree Woman', and his life is forever changed. He soon develops powers, senses and physical deformities of his own: the central deformity being morbid obesity that is brought on rapidly and is irreversible. Unlike Creb and Leveret, Nevare despises the spirits for corrupting his physical appearance so hideously and does not see it as a gift. In fact, it brings him nothing but bad luck, resulting in his expulsion from the academy, being shunned by his fiancée, and eventually being disowned by his father and sent to the back end of nowhere to live out the rest of his days as a lonely, fat man who is good for nothing else other than digging graves and being mocked.

As a somewhat foolish soldier, Nevare is not willing to perform any of the aforementioned stereotypical shaman duties for either his own people or the primitive Specks, and is forced to perform similar tasks to Leveret and Creb either under duress, through being blackmailed, by being possessed by the Speck side of his spirit, or through a completely spontaneous and uncontrolled action: for example, in *Forest Mage*, when he uses his gifts to grow vegetables for a woman and her children (2008, p352). In fact, it is only at the end of the series in *Renegade Mage* (2008), that Nevare consciously uses his powers and accepts the position of 'Great One' amongst the Speck people – a 'Great One' being a spiritual leader who has a deep connection with spirits and nature, who can manipulate the elements, and whose girth is directly proportional to how much power they have.

Although his obesity appears to be the central disfigurement in Nevare's life since he became a 'Great One', there is another part of himself that can also be associated with the idea of

deformity acting as a representation of power. Some shamanic societies believe that the calling or summoning of a shaman involves some form of spiritual dismemberment. It is then brought back together in some way into a new body with new power. This process is called 'Sparagmos' (Turner, 2004, p13), and is deemed an initiation of sorts, where the shaman goes through great suffering and emerges stronger, more powerful and wiser than before. Nevare goes through this process in *Shaman's Crossing* when he loses half of his spirit and some of his hair to the Tree Woman, who is later referred to as Lisana, a spirit of a former 'Great One' of the Speck people who claims part of his spirit for herself. Without this half, Nevare suffers greatly, which is reminiscent of a shaman's initiation. It is another form of disfigurement that marks him out as a being of potential power. This split in his spirit results in his identity crisis on a spiritual level and leads him to take the first step down a long road to becoming a 'Great One' (2006, p118). When he meets Lisana, Nevare is forced to make a choice. Either he can give himself to the magic and do its bidding, or he can die a painful death. Naturally, Nevare chooses to live, not really understanding the consequences of his decision or the influence of the Speck magic. Yet, it is only as the series progresses that he learns that he had chosen to split himself in two that day: his mortal form, which represents his old life and devotion to his people and their gods; and a spirit part of himself that belongs to Lisana and the Speck people. This loss of his spirit half creates an identity crisis for Nevare.

In Mongolian shamanism, any sickness was deemed a sickness of the soul, yet the shaman understood that the physical symptoms needed to be treated as well. According to Buryat Mongol (2015), it is this spirit sickness that 'suppress the body's natural capability to heal itself', and until it is cured, the disease will never be truly healed, as is the case with Nevare's obesity. This can also be compared to Iza's illness that Creb tried to heal (1980, p445).

According to Endredy, a shaman is in fact a 'healed healer' (2009, p59). If you take into account their initiation processes and the circumstances under which a shaman can be chosen, this makes sense, as they go through a great deal of personal suffering and torment before they reach the peace of mind required to be a shaman. Nevare is sick himself after being infected by Speck

magic. With part of his soul living in the other realm with the Tree Woman, he finds his mortal side weaker and prone to intrusions from his other self. It is only when the two parts of his soul are reunited that he finds himself whole again, albeit with a new identity crisis on his hands as his Speck half fights him for control (2008, p64). This is reminiscent of, but comparatively different to, Creb's difficult birth and the attack from the cave bear, as well as Leveret's traumatic fall from the cliff and the sight that was stolen from her. Each of these characters faced great hardship and suffered only to come out wiser, stronger, more talented and more aware of their pivotal roles as shamanic practitioners.

With Nevare, he would never have had to endure the hardships of his identity crisis, the primitive and sinister ways of the Speck people, or the difficulties of becoming a 'Great One', if he hadn't ventured into the Lower World with the Kidona tribesman, Dewara, his father's old enemy. The journey they take is brought on by the ingestion of aromatic herbs and concentration that takes the two men into a trance state, as is a common method used by shamans around the globe. This can be seen with Creb, who uses a secret herbal concoction to travel to the other planes of existence with his fellow Mog-Urs (1980, p428-34); with Ayla who also tastes the mix and travels with them; and with Clip and Leveret when they burn aromatic herbs to induce a trance not only for themselves, but for the rest of their people so that they can journey together (2012, p202).

Unlike Berry and Auel, Hobb has Nevare ingest the herbs and then walk off a cliff with Dewara, which is a more physical method of entering another world. In most shamanic cultures, what connects the three worlds – Upper, Middle, and Lower – is what is commonly referred to as the World Tree. In Norse shamanism, this is called Yggdrasil and connects all the realms with its roots, branches and trunk. This tree symbolises the universe in 'continual regeneration' (Nicholson, 1987, p25) as it spans all three worlds, represents the fertility of the earth, and is sacred to those following shamanism. The concept of a tree connecting the worlds is common throughout the variations of the practice around the globe, but it is not something that is widely used in fantasy fiction.

Considering it is an important part of shamanism, that is perhaps a little surprising, but it seems that the worlds themselves and what they entail is seen as a more useful tool for fantasy authors. Then again, Lisana is essentially a former human and 'Great One' who is now one with a tree. Not only can she exist in the Lower and Middle worlds, but she can affect things in normal, human reality as well. This could be seen as a subtle representation of the World Tree, because despite her being a selfish and rather hostile character at times, she does connect the different worlds and is an awe-inspiring character who is worshipped by her people and is a fierce defender of nature and the balance of life.

Shamanism also focuses on rebirth. After a living thing dies, its spirit first finds itself in the Middle World, albeit on a different plane of existence to those still mortal. It is part of the shaman's role to see them, speak to them, and 'usher [them] to their final destination' (Sidky, 2010, p215). If a spirit wants to make contact, it will find a way, sometimes possessing the shaman to speak their words. This occurs in the first novel of Hobb's trilogy, *Shaman's Crossing*, when Nevare senses spirits nearby, 'waiting for a chance to speak through [him]' (2005, p422) and when his cousin, Epiny, working as a medium, is possessed by the Tree Woman's spirit so that a message of warning and threat could be delivered to him (2006, p422).

It is Epiny's character that brings occultism into Hobb's work. As a series that has drawn inspiration from both practices, *Soldier Son* is clever in the methods chosen to integrate the two. While Nevare has his trances, connection to nature, and physical size that all correlate to his power as a Speck 'Great One', his cousin, Epiny, is more like a medium of the occult. She states that a 'trained medium' couldn't summon the spirits because they all wanted to go to her (2006, p398), implying that she has more natural power than the others, and it is her unique perspective and link with spirits that enables her to bond with Nevare and help keep herself and her future husband, Spink, alive- when Lisana and Nevare's Speck half attempt to absorb their spirits (2006, p597).

Another comparison to make is that Leveret and Epiny both receive dreams and visions, but are more open to receiving them than Nevare, who resists them. They take the messages given to

them and use them to benefit others. It appears that acceptance of a calling and the dreams or visions that come with it results in better luck for the shaman in question; the white-feathered crow helps keep Leveret safe (2012, p218), while Epiny's mental connection with Nevare through her dreams not only gives her hope that he is still alive, but also starts her healing process (2008, p223).

Yet it is not only Epiny's natural affinity with mediumship that helps cure her of her sickness. As is seen throughout the novels, there are other methods of healing that help various characters, including Nevare. Hobb, although also including mystical healing water and herbs in her novels, also uses the shamanic belief of souls being vital to one's health. In *Renegade's Mage*, Lisana tells Epiny that she 'could have stripped [Nevare's] soul from his body and he would have died in all worlds' (2008, p111). Normally a shaman would perform a soul retrieval as a method of healing a sick person who has been 'dis-spirited' (Harner, 1990, p69), but what if the shaman himself suffered soul loss, as Nevare did? Nevare, although new to the role when his spirit self is separated from him, is to become a Speck 'Great One'. Clearly Lisana is saying that if there is nobody around to find that spirit self for him, he will die.

Compared to the two novels already analysed, Hobb has surpassed what I was expecting. Where Auel and Berry were obvious about their intentions to be true to shamanism in their own way, Hobb took the elements of the practice and adapted them to suit her novels. Yes, she made Dewara of the Kidona clan a shaman of his people, but it is the concentration on the Speck people and the various traditions, abilities and ritual dances they follow devoutly that sets the *Soldier Son* trilogy apart from Auel and Berry's work. To use shamanic aspects and make them into something relatively original was something I knew from the very beginning that I wanted to focus on with *Transcendent*. Both Nevare and Outcast stray from their callings, suffer in their own ways, and eventually come to accept their new selves and make the best of their situations. This isn't seen in the extract of *Transcendent* provided with this thesis, but is intended for the finished novel.

Shamanism in *Transcendent*

As detailed in previous sections, my intentions in regards to *Transcendent* was to take the various aspects of my research into shamanism and incorporate them into a secondary world of my own creation. Not only did this include the abilities and beliefs associated with shamanism – such as trance states, spirits, and answering the shaman's call – but it also focused on the geographical variations that I discovered whilst researching the practice. What I found particularly interesting was that although there were cultural differences between them, there were also many similarities, despite the fact these variations were located on entirely different continents.

For example, in Mongolian shamanism, the 'steppe dwelling peoples of Eurasia worship Eternal Heaven (Munkh Tenger) above and Mother Earth (Etugan) below, as well as the ancestral and nature spirits.' (The Mongolian Shamans' Association, 2016). This is a concept I found corroborated by Michael Harner and is also mentioned by Edith Turner in her article for the University of Pennsylvania (2004, p13) when she states: '[there is] a sense of a spiritual connection that exists between everyone and everything in the universe.' The cosmology of Mongolian shamanism and its eight customary rituals is based on the view that, besides the visible world, the shaman interacts with many other worlds or universes, and that contacting the spirits is an important part of a shamans' work. This was a key notion I included in my creative piece from the beginning. From Nambe's meeting with the Blue Wolf in his dreams (2016, p10), to Outcast's use of trance to speak with the demon in the old couple's home (2016, p45), the secondary world is a place where the boundaries between the natural and supernatural worlds are blurred, with the Magickers and their people being the ones who believe that it is all connected, and the plainspeople and the invading empire being sceptical.

According to Prezi.com (2014), some Aborigines of Australia also believe that the human, supernatural and natural worlds are all connected, and that their ancestors are mystical beings who have special powers of shapeshifting and come back to life within unborn children. This was an

aspect I intended to replicate in *Transcendent*. As the story unfolds, Outcast would eventually learn that his stubborn spirit companion, Kala, would in fact be one of his own ancestors sent by the Blue Wolf to guide him. She chose to assume the form of a tigress as she felt it would help her to create a new bond with her descendant that would be untarnished by any shred of familial obligation. Although, knowing Outcast's character and his tendency to tread his own destructive path, that obligation probably wouldn't exist anyway.

Another interesting aspect to note when it comes to the Aborigines is that they too, like the other variations of shamanism I've researched, had a figure within their societies who acted as a healer with special gifts. George Taplin and James Dominic Wood in their book, *The Native Tribes of South Australia* (1879), spoke of a man known as the Koonkie, who had 'seen the devil' (1879, p283) and had been given power by him to heal his people. The idea is that if a man or woman had a nightmare as a child, then they would be assumed to have seen the devil. Albeit slightly different in Outcast's case, his gifts as a Magicker did reveal themselves after meeting the Blue Wolf in a dream (2016, p15-17).

As can be found in Mongolian shamanism and the Aborigines, those who assume the healer/shaman role can be of either gender. However, there was one variation I researched that was gender-specific when it came to their shamans: the Norse shamanism of Seidr. Seidr was a form of magic concerned with 'discerning and altering the course of destiny' (norse-mythology.org, 2016). It involved ceremonies using a ritual distaff that enabled to practitioner to enter trances and travel in spirit throughout the nine worlds. This practitioner was called the Völva and it was a role predominantly filled by women. Men could perform the role, but it was seen as shameful as it was seen as a female duty. My character, Asta, is from a northern tribe similar to the Nordic societies found during my research. She too has a staff that she uses to carry out her tasks and she uses it to look into the web of people's destinies, which is why she is so confused that she cannot see Outcast's (2016, p40).

The gender of my characters was a conscious decision when I first started this project. I always wanted my central character, Outcast, to be male. This was because in past projects I have always used female characters as protagonists and I wanted to step out of my comfort zone. However, I did want the supporting characters to be female – namely Kala, Asta and Frost – as I felt that through them I could bring out Outcast’s flaws better: his lack of compassion, his missing morals, and eventually his own vulnerabilities. They challenge him. Whether it be Kala’s open refusal to stop pestering him (2016, p20) or Asta throwing him through a window (2016, p54), the women in *Transcendent* force Outcast to demonstrate reactions that would be different if they were men. For example, if Asta were male then their initial meeting in her illusion (Ivatt, 2016, p33) would have been less about Outcast’s missing morals when it comes to defending the people, and more than likely could have escalated into a show of machismo and male bravado. It would have appeared to be more of an alpha-male battle than a representation of how far he has fallen and strayed from his true path.

While the women have their own roles to play in the challenging of Outcast’s character, it is Outcast himself who serves as a tool to portray the majority of the shamanic research I undertook during this thesis. It is through him that we see the use of trance states and the existence of spirits – such as in the prologue where he has a conversation with the spirit of the merchant’s wife (2016, p6). It is also through Outcast that we see the reverse of what my research has shown to be the fundamental beliefs of shamanism as a practice. While the rest of the Magickers and their people respect nature and the spirit realms, he shuns them and uses them for his own gain. For instance, most Magickers would try to help the merchant’s wife to adapt to her new spirit-self, but Outcast not only dismisses her, he abandons her infant child as well (2016, p7).

Aside from his disrespect for the supernatural, there are other elements of shamanism I incorporated into the piece. In Nambe’s dream, (2016, p10), he mentions that there are no talismans for protection hanging from the trees, which leads him to believe that he is dreaming and not gazing upon his home. In her article *The Personal Mythology of a Shamanic Healer* (2003), Marilyn Terhune-

Young mentions a shaman named Journeyhawk who states that she keeps symbols that connected her to an 'authority of her bloodline' in a bag around her neck for protection, and that 'if something unexpected happened, those [she] was connected to could use those power symbols to retrieve [her] spirit' (p38). The idea of talismans for protection has already been mentioned in this thesis with *Shaman of Stonewylde*, where Leveret's niece uncovered a toad bag she believed to be evil, when in fact it was protection that ultimately led to the death of her mother, Sylvie (2012, p549).

In addition to talismans and Asta's staff, another conscious inclusion of my research was the use of herbs. Outcast chews on Ambago leaves to dull the constant pain of his burning eye socket (2016, p18), and as would be revealed further on in the full novel, Asta would be a keen user of herbs for healing. A key scene involving the use of herbs for shamanic purposes is at the beginning of the piece, where Kala uses herbs to force Outcast to remember parts of his past that he doesn't want to re-experience (2016, p19-22). This is reminiscent of the herbs shamans around the globe would use to induce trances to spirit-travel or receive messages from the spirits themselves.

Peter T. Furst in his article *Visionary Plants and Ecstatic Shamanism* (2004), mentions a tale told to him by a Siberian shaman in which a character named Raven eats a herb named *wapaq* and states that 'when anyone who is sick ate a *wapaq* it would tell him what ailed him, or explain the meaning of a dream, show him the Upperworld, the world beneath the ground, or foretell the future' (p26). In the complete *Transcendent*, the use of herbs in this manner would be explored in greater detail. Even though Outcast can enter trances at will due to his Transcendent roots, other Magickers cannot and would rely on herbs to induce the state they required in order to accomplish their tasks.

As discussed in a separate section earlier in this thesis, there is another theme besides shamanism and its tools, abilities, and cultural traditions that is apparent in my work – occultism. At first it wasn't something I set out to explore, but during the course of my research and the materials I used as evidence for this thesis, the significance of the comparison between occultism and shamanism not only became important to discuss on an academic level, but it also filtered through

into my own creative piece. Firstly, the term I use to define those with shamanic powers, Magickers, implies that those who belong to it are wielders of magic, when in fact their powers are based upon the geographical variations of shamanism. In reflection, I chose the term because it is a representation of how others who do not understand the ways of the Magickers perceive them. To the plainspeople and the empire, Magickers are unnatural conjurers. They don't comprehend their belief systems or the three worlds, the beings that dwell in them, or the gifts these Magickers are given in order to protect and serve their communities.

Not only this, but Asta, Frost and other Magickers represent the variations of shamanism I researched – Nordic, Mongolian, American-Indian, among others – with Outcast becoming an embodiment of the clash between the two practices. I've already spoken about occultism and the basis of will and personal gain being fundamental in promoting the difference when comparing it to shamanism, so it's clear to see how Outcast's character is not only able to blur the boundaries between the natural and supernatural worlds, but also acts as a blurring of the two practices. He turns his back on his people and his shamanic upbringing, choosing to use his gifts to manipulate the world into achieving his own personal goals and motivations. Like the three hags in *Shaman of Stonewylde*, Outcast has no problem using his powers to harm others. He quite happily unleashes a vicious demon on a village of innocent people, all for the sake of herbs he spied that could be useful (Ivatt, 2016, p45), and he has no concerns over abandoning a baby that would inconvenience him in saving without adequate compensation (2016, p7).

Personally, I believe that it is Outcast's character – how he moves throughout the world, his abilities, his lack of morals, his reactions to stimuli and other Magickers – that best reflects the research I undertook in preparing for this project. Through him the reader can experience everything he does and come to understand that he is a man who has not only strayed from his path, but is acting in a completely unacceptable way, effectively being a 'what not to do' example of a Magicker and their foundations in shamanism. Then again, who is to say that the occult traits he shows aren't a form of the survival of the shamanic practice? If you take out the personal gain, the similarities

between the two are clear, as already discussed, and the common beliefs, abilities and traditions are obvious as well. Perhaps the only difference between the two is that occultists have familiars instead of power animals.

Overall, what began as a project investigating how shamanism is represented in fantasy fiction, has ended being an in-depth examination of geographical variations, a comparison of two age-old and somewhat similar practices, as well as an eye-opening revelation into my own poetics as a writer. *Transcendent* has grown from a representation of my research to a full-blown idea for a novel that will look into shamanism, occultism and the blurring of boundaries that will impact me as a writer and has led me to recognise aspects of shamanism in other fantasy novels. From Robin Hobb to Kit Berry, Jean M. Auel to Storm Constantine, and from David Eddings to the work of Andrzej Sapkowski, I can now see the use of trances, herbs, spirit realms and spirit-travelling that can either be affiliated with occultism, or can be traced back to shamanism itself. Fantasy fiction has many tropes that authors use, such as power animals and shapeshifting, but perhaps the authors themselves aren't even aware of where the influence for their work has originated from. That is another interesting line of research that I intend to follow in the future and for which this thesis, with all its research and creative impact, will form a solid foundation.

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Appendix 1: List of Shamanism examples in Fantasy Fiction

There are many examples I came across in my research for this thesis (over two dozen, to be precise), but to mention them all would be to double my word count. What follows is a list of those I particularly enjoyed and that provide excellent representations of shamanism at work in fantasy fiction, whether obvious and intentional or not.

Ahmed, S. (2012) *Throne of the Crescent Moon* – A young girl from a tribe can transform into a lioness. The characters stress the importance of respecting spirits and other entities.

Borchardt, A. (2003) *The Raven Warrior* – Blackleg, also known as Lancelot, is half-man, half-wolf and must prove himself as a warrior. It follows the first book, *The Dragon Queen* (2001), where shape-shifting, trances, and speaking with a spirit through a severed head took place. In the sequel, Lancelot, Guinevere, and Arthur all travel to different realms through underground tunnels, lakes, and strange mountains, in order to fulfil their quests.

Britain, K. (1998-2014) *Green Rider* series – Karigan is a young girl who becomes a green rider, a messenger for the king. Her brooch can make her invisible, and she faces enemies who use amulets, chants, and trances to try to kill the king and release an old enemy. It's a mix of stereotypical occult abilities with elements of shamanism.

Brooks, T. (1989) *The Scions of Shannara* – The protagonist, Par, has a power called the Wishsong, which he uses to create illusions, deflect bad spirits, and to tell vivid, almost lifelike stories. He was born with the power, not taught it.

Eddings, D. (1982) *Belgariad* series – Belgarath and Polgara can shapeshift into other living creatures (mainly a wolf and snow owl respectively). There are visitations from spiritual ancestors; a man who goes ‘beserker’ whenever the protagonist is in trouble, changing into a wild bear; amulets and stones with magical attributes; a man who can communicate with horses; and a blending of occultism with shamanic foundations.

Harris, J.M. (2014) *The Gospel of Loki* – Norse Seidr shamanism. Yggdrasil as the world tree connecting everything, with a river used to travel through worlds. Odin’s two crows are his power animals, extensions of himself, as is Sleipnir, the eight-legged spectral horse. Shields are decorated with runes to give their owners protection.

Robinson, K.S. (2013) *Shaman* – Representation of a shamanic society in a prehistoric era. The protagonist, Loon, is a shaman’s apprentice who must pass tests to prove he is worthy of being a shaman. The story is narrated by a non-human, spirit-like entity called the Third Wind, making this novel fall into the fantasy genre. Loon and his mentor, Thorn, have supernatural abilities associated with shamans: visions, travelling through the dream world, speaking with spirits, healing abilities. They also focus on traditional functions, such as story-telling.

Sapkowski, A. (2007) *Witcher* series – Geralt, a Witcher, has shamanic-related powers of healing, divination and trances, whereas the females in the story tend to lean toward occultist aspects. Ciri is the exception, as she is a girl with a mixture of both shamanic Witcher qualities and the occult. Geralt’s white hair and strange eyes are his form of shaman’s deformity, marking him out as a Witcher who not only speaks to spirits, but fights them. He has a talisman to warn him of impending danger.

Takei, H. (2003) *Shaman King* – A manga series about Yoh, a young shaman, who enlists the spirit of a dead samurai, Amidamaru, to help him fight other shamans and to save people. Yoh faces another shaman who uses amulets to control spirits, making them hurt others, which Yoh sees as great disrespect.

Vance, C. (2015) *Bone Dry: A Soul Shaman's Novel* – Holly inherits her shamanic gifts from her grandmother and has been fully aware of her potential since she was a child.

Wendig, C. (2012) *Mockingbird* – Miriam, being a woman who has the gift of foreseeing how people will die, describes her powers as a 'deep urge', which is reminiscent of shamanic cultures where shamans find themselves drawn to their abilities as if by instinct. Crows act as spirit guides in this novel, speaking to Miriam in her dreams, acting as mystical messengers. She can link her mind with other crows to control their actions.

Appendix Two – Synopsis for *Transcendent*

Exiled by his people as a child, Outcast now roams the land as a rogue Magicker, hiring out his services to those in need, but only if the price is right. He is followed by a spirit tigress named Kala, who is determined to get him back on the path he shunned as a boy, believing that he has a higher purpose, but Outcast thinks otherwise. He couldn't care less about his destiny. All he wants is to be left alone.

The empire that now rules the land has other plans. Threatened by the Magickers and all they represent, the emperor had them slaughtered, but a few survived to form a resistance. Asta, a Magicker from the northern mountains, comes to recruit Outcast to the cause, but he refuses and is soon hired by the emperor himself, using his unique abilities to locate an escaped prisoner.

With Asta and Kala both adamant they go with him, Outcast finds himself following the tracks of a young girl who has abilities of her own, a girl who can destroy everything the emperor has built.

Once he has her, Outcast faces a dilemma – either he can take the girl back and claim his reward or he can help her, train her to be a warrior for the resistance, and deliver the land back to the people once and for all.

There's just one problem.

Outcast isn't one of the people.

He's a Transcendent. A member of an almost mythical faction of Magickers long since condemned to history, abandoned by the very people he is being asked to protect. His powers growing and his morals almost non-existent, it seems to him that the answer to his question is clear, but there are secrets from his past coming back to haunt him. Soon he finds that there is more at stake and that maybe this is a war he can't ignore after all.

Appendix Three – World Map for Transcendent

